

Leo Strauss (1937)

On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching¹

EDITOR'S NOTE

Leo Strauss's essay "On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching" originally appeared in *Isaac Abravanel: Six Lectures*, ed. J. B. Trend and H. Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937), pp. 95–129. See also Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz: Frühe Schriften*, vol. 2 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, pp. 195–227 (with Strauss's marginal handwritten additional comments transcribed, pp. 229–31). A French translation has also been produced, appearing in print as "Sur l'orientation philosophique et l'enseignement politique d'Abravanel," trans. Adrien Barrot, *Revue de Méta-physique et de Morale*, no. 4 (1998): 559–84. Readers should note that in this present version (as follows both Meier's edition of the original English, and Barrot's French translation), Strauss's notes are numbered consecutively, i.e., from 1 to 80, as was not the case in the original, which numbered the notes of Strauss's essay separately on each page. I would venture to suggest that this was likely the convention of the publisher of the book in which the essay originally appeared, rather than the choice of the author, which has been assumed in renumbering them consecutively. The supplementary reference material set in square brackets in the notes is entirely the work of the present editor; it attempts to provide additional scholarly data useful for some readers in studying the contents of Strauss's own notes.

ABRAVANEL MAY BE CALLED THE LAST OF THE JEWISH PHILOSOPHERS of the Middle Ages. He belongs to the Middle Ages as far as the framework and the main content of his doctrine are concerned. It is true that there are features of his thought which distinguish it from that of all or of most other Jewish

1. I wish to express my thanks to the Board of the Faculty of History (at the University of Cambridge) for a grant enabling this essay to be written, and to Mrs. M. C. Blackman for kindly revising the English.

medieval philosophers; but most of those features are probably of medieval Christian origin. Yet Abravanel is a son of the humanist age, and thus we shall not be surprised if he expresses in his writings opinions or tendencies which are, to say the least, not characteristic of the Middle Ages. Generally speaking, however, Abravanel is a medieval thinker, a Jewish medieval thinker.

The central figure in the history of Jewish medieval philosophy is Maimonides. Thus it will be advisable to define the character of Abravanel's philosophical tendency by contrasting it with that of Maimonides. One is all the more justified in proceeding thus, since there is scarcely any other philosopher whom Abravanel admired so much, or whom he followed as much, as he did Maimonides.

What was then the general tendency of Maimonides? The answer to this question seems to be obvious: Maimonides attempted to harmonize the teachings of Jewish tradition with the teachings of philosophical tradition, i.e., of the Aristotelian tradition. This answer is certainly not altogether wrong, but it is quite insufficient, since it fails to explain which ultimate assumptions enabled Maimonides to harmonize Judaism and Aristotle. Now those truly decisive assumptions are neither of Jewish nor of Aristotelian origin: they are borrowed from Plato, from Plato's political philosophy.

At a first glance, the philosophical tradition from which Maimonides starts seems to be identical with that which is the determining factor of Christian scholasticism. Indeed, to Maimonides as well as to Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle is *the* philosopher. There is, however, one striking and at the same time highly important difference between Maimonides and the Christian scholastic as regards the philosophical tradition on which they build. For Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle is the highest authority, not only in other branches of philosophy, but also in political philosophy. Maimonides, on the other hand, could not use Aristotle's *Politics*, since it had not been translated into Arabic or Hebrew; but he could start, and he did start, from Plato's political philosophy.² For the *Republic* and the *Laws*, which were inaccessible to the Latin Middle Ages,³ had been translated into Arabic in the ninth century, and com-

2. For details I must refer the reader for the time being to my book *Philosophie und Gesetz* (Berlin: Schocken, 1935); and to my article "Quelques Remarques sur la Science Politique de Maïmonide et de Farabi," in *Revue des Études Juives* 100 (1936): 1–37. [See *Philosophy and Law*, and "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi," chap. 5 above. For the fate and fortune of Aristotle's *Politics* in the medieval Arabic-speaking world, see Shlomo Pines, "Aristotle's *Politics* in Arabic Philosophy," *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975): 150–60; reprinted in *The Collected Works of Shlomo Pines* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), vo. 2, pp. 146–56.]

3. Cf. Ernest Barker, *Plato and his Predecessors* (London: Methuen, 1918), p. 383 [also named *Greek Political Theory: Plato and His Predecessors* (London: Methuen, 1960), p. 445]: "For a thousand years the

mentaries on them had been written by two of the most outstanding Islamic philosophers.⁴ By considering these facts we gain, I believe, a clear impression of the philosophical difference which exists between the philosophy of Maimonides (and of his Islamic predecessors) on the one hand, and that of Christian scholasticism on the other: the place occupied in the latter by Aristotle's *Politics* is occupied in the former by Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*. I have read that in some Italian pictures Plato is represented holding in his hand the *Timaeus* and Aristotle his *Ethics*. If a pupil of Maimonides or of the Islamic philosophers⁵ had found pleasure in representations of this kind, he might have chosen rather the inverse order: Aristotle with his *Physics* or *Metaphysics* and Plato with his *Republic* or *Laws*.

For what is the meaning of the fact that Maimonides and the Islamic philosophers whom he followed start from Platonic political philosophy, and not from Aristotle's *Politics*? One cannot avoid raising this question, especially since the circumstance that the *Politics* was not translated into Arabic may well be, not a mere matter of chance, but the result of a deliberate choice, made in the beginning of this medieval development. Now, in order to answer that question, we must remind ourselves of the general character of the medieval world, and of the particular character of the Islamic philosophy adopted by Maimonides. The medieval world is distinguished both from the classical and from the modern world by the fact that its thought was fundamentally determined by the belief in revelation. Revelation was the deter-

Republic has no history, for a thousand years it simply disappeared. From the days of Proclus, the neo-Platonist of the fifth century, almost until the days of Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, at the end of the fifteenth, the *Republic* was practically a lost book." The same holds true, as far as the Latin Middle Ages are concerned, of the *Laws*.

4. Farabi's paraphrase of the *Laws* will be edited in the near future by Dr. Paul Kraus. [See now Paul Kraus, "Le sommaire du livre des *Lois* de Platon par Abu Nasr al-Farabi," ed. Thérèse-Anne Druart, *Bulletin d'Études Orientales* 50 (1998): 109–55; Muhsin Mahdi, "The Editio princeps of Farabi's *Compendium Legum Platonis*," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 20 (1961): 1–24; Alfarabius, *Compendium Legum Platonis/Talkhis nawwanis Aflatun*, ed. Franciscus Gabrieli (London: Warburg Institute, 1952). See now also Leo Strauss, "How Farabi Read Plato's *Laws*," in *What Is Political Philosophy?*, pp. 194–54.] The original of Averroes' paraphrase of the *Republic* seems to be lost, but this paraphrase is accessible in an often-printed Latin translation. The more reliable Hebrew translation is being edited by Dr. Erwin Rosenthal; see the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (October 1934), pp. 737ff. [See now Averroes' *Commentary on Plato's "Republic"*, ed. E. I. J. Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), which contains a critical edition of the Hebrew translation and an English translation. But see especially for the English translation Averroes, *On Plato's "Republic,"* trans. Lerner. This version is based on an additional and often better manuscript of the Hebrew translation; different principles of translation which offer a version closer to Averroes' language (as presented, of course, by the Hebrew translator); and a different view of the intention of Averroes that receives expression in his work.]

5. When speaking of Islamic philosophers, I am limiting myself strictly to the *falsafah*, the so-called Aristotelians.

mining factor with the Islamic philosophers as well as with the Jewish and Christian philosophers. But as was clearly recognized by such contemporary and competent observers as Ghazali, Maimonides, and Thomas Aquinas, the Islamic philosophers did not believe in revelation properly speaking. They were philosophers in the classical sense of the word: men who would hearken to reason, and to reason only. Consequently, they were compelled to give an account of the revelation which they had to accept, and which they did accept, in terms of human reason. Their task was facilitated by the fact that revelation, as understood by Jews or Muslims, had the form of law. Revelation, thus understood, lent itself to being interpreted by loyal philosophers as a perfect, ideal law, as an ideal political order. Moreover, the Islamic philosophers were compelled, and so was Maimonides, to justify their pursuit of philosophy before the law to which they were subject; they had, therefore, to prove that the law did not only entitle them, but even oblige them, to devote themselves to philosophy. Consequently, they were driven to interpret revelation more precisely as an ideal political order, the ideal character of which consists in the very fact that it lays upon all men endowed with the necessary qualities the duty of devoting their lives to philosophy, that it awakens them to philosophy, that it holds out for their guidance at least the most important tenets of philosophy. For this purpose they had to assume that the founder of the ideal political order, the prophetic lawgiver, was not merely a statesman, but that he was, at the same time, a philosopher of the highest authority: they had to conceive, and they did conceive, of Moses or Muhammad as philosopher-kings. Philosopher-kings and a political community governed by philosopher-kings were, however, the theme not of Aristotelian but of Platonic political philosophy. Thus we may say: Maimonides and his Islamic predecessors start from Platonic political philosophy because they had to conceive of the revelation to which they were subject as of an ideal political order, the specific purpose of which was guidance to philosophy. And we may add that their belief in the authority of Moses or Muhammad was perhaps not greatly different from what would have been the belief of a later Greek Platonist in the authority of Plato, if that Platonist had been the citizen of a commonwealth governed by Plato's *Laws*.

Judaism on the one hand, Aristotelianism on the other, certainly supplied the greatest part of the matter of Maimonides' teaching. But Platonic political philosophy provided at any rate the framework for the two achievements by which Maimonides made an epoch in the history of Judaism: for his codification of the Jewish law, and for his philosophical defense of the Jewish law. It is

open to question which of Plato's political works was the most important for Maimonides and the Islamic philosophers. But it is safe to say that the best clue to the understanding of their teaching is supplied by the *Laws*.⁶ I cannot discuss here the true meaning of this most ironical of Plato's works, although I believe that only the full understanding of its true meaning would enable us to understand adequately the medieval philosophy of which I am speaking. For our present purpose, it is sufficient to state that the *Laws* are certainly the primary source of the opinions which Maimonides and his teachers held concerning the relation between philosophy and revelation, or more exactly between philosophy and law. Those opinions may be summarized in the following ways: (1) Law is based on certain fundamental beliefs or dogmas of a strictly philosophical character, and those beliefs are, as it were, the prelude to the whole law. The beliefs of this kind were called by Farabi, who was, according to Maimonides, the highest philosophical authority of his period, "opinions of the people of the excellent city." (2) Law contains, apart from those rational beliefs, a number of other beliefs which, while being not properly true but representing the truth in a disguised way, are necessary or useful in the interest of the political community. The beliefs of this type may be called, as they were by Spinoza, who was perhaps the latest exponent of that medieval tradition, *pia dogmata*, in contradistinction to the *vera dogmata* of the first group.⁷ (3) Necessary beliefs, i.e., the beliefs which are not common to philosophy and law but peculiar to law as such, are to be defended (either by themselves or together with the whole law) by probable, persuasive, rhetorical arguments, not recognizable as such to the vulgar; a special science is to be devoted to that "defense of the law" or "assistance to the law."

We are now in a position to define more precisely the character of Maimonides' attempt to harmonize the Jewish tradition with the philosophical

6. Ernest Barker, loc. cit., p. 351, says with regard to the Latin Middle Ages: "The end of the *Laws* is the beginning of the Middle Ages." [See *Greek Political Theory*, p. 409.] This statement is all the more true of the Islamic and Jewish Middle Ages. Compare, for example, the quotations from Avicenna in *Philosophie und Gesetz*, p. 111, and from R. Sheshet in *Revue des Études Juives* 100 (1936), p. 2, n. 1. [For the Avicenna passage, see "Maimonides' Doctrine of Prophecy," the fourth paragraph of section IV, chap. 4 above; and for the R. Sheshet passage, see "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi," chap. 5 above, n. 2.]

7. *Tractatus theologicopoliticus*, ch. 14 (§20, Bruder).

[It follows, finally, that faith does not require true dogmas so much as pious ones, that is, such as move the spirit toward obedience—even though among them there may be very many that do not have even a shadow of truth, yet so long as he who embraces them is ignorant of their being false. Otherwise he would necessarily be rebellious. For how could it happen that someone who loves Justice and is eager to follow God will adore as divine what he knows to be alien to the divine nature?" See Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, trans. Yaffe, p. 164.]

tradition. He effects the harmony between those two traditions by starting from the conception of a perfect law, perfect in the sense of Plato's *Laws*, i.e., of a law leading to the study of philosophy and based on philosophical truth, and by thus proving that Judaism is a law of this character. To prove this, he shows that the fundamental beliefs of Judaism are identical with the fundamental tenets of philosophy, i.e., with those tenets on which an ideal law ought to be based. By showing this, he shows at the same time that those Jewish beliefs which are of an unphilosophical nature are meant by the Jewish legislator himself, by *the* philosopher legislator, to be necessary beliefs, i.e., beliefs necessary for political reasons. The assumption underlying this proof of the ideal character of the Jewish law is the opinion that the law has two different meanings: an exterior, literal meaning, addressed to the vulgar, which expresses both the philosophical and the necessary beliefs, and a secret meaning of a purely philosophical nature. Now this property of law had to be imitated by Maimonides in his philosophic interpretation of the law. For if he had distinguished explicitly between true and necessary beliefs, he would have endangered the acceptance of the necessary beliefs on which the authority of the law with the vulgar, i.e., with the great majority, rests. Consequently, he could make this essential distinction only in a disguised way, partly by allusions, partly by the composition of his whole work, but mainly by the rhetorical character, recognizable only to philosophers, of the arguments by which he defends the necessary beliefs. As a consequence, Maimonides' philosophical work, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, is a most ingenious combination of "opinions of the people of the excellent city," i.e., of a strictly demonstrative discussion of the beliefs which are common to philosophy and law, with "defense of the law," i.e., with a rhetorical discussion of the unphilosophical beliefs peculiar to the law. Thus not only the law itself, but also Maimonides' philosophical interpretation of the law, has two different meanings: a literal meaning, addressed to the more unphilosophic reader of philosophic education, which is very near to the traditional Jewish beliefs, and a secret meaning, addressed to true philosophers, which is purely philosophical. This amounts to saying that Maimonides' philosophical work was liable to, and was intended to be liable to, two fundamentally different interpretations: to a "radical" interpretation which did honor to the consistency of his thought, and to a "moderate" interpretation which did honor rather to the fervor of his belief.

The ambiguous nature of Maimonides' philosophical work must be recognized if one wants to judge properly of the general tendency of Abravanel.

For Abravanel has to be characterized to begin with as a strict, even passionate, adherent of the literal interpretation of the *Guide of the Perplexed*. The more philosophic interpretation of this work had appealed to some earlier commentators. Those commentators, who were under the spell of Islamic philosophy rather than of Christian scholasticism, are vehemently attacked by Abravanel,⁸ who finds words of the highest praise for the Christian scholastics.⁹ But Abravanel accepts the literal teaching of the *Guide* not only as the true expression of Maimonides' thought: that literal teaching is at the same time, if not identical with, at least the framework of, Abravanel's own philosophy.

The beliefs peculiar to the law are founded upon and, as it were, derived from one fundamental conviction: the belief in *creatio ex nihilo*.¹⁰ That belief had been defended by Maimonides in his *Guide* with great care and vigor. The discussion of the creation of the world, or, in other words, the criticism of the contention of the philosophers that the visible world is eternal, forms literally the central part of the *Guide*. It is the central part of this work also because of the fact that the interpretation of the whole work depends on the interpretation of this very part. Indeed, this is the crucial question for the

8. Cf. his judgments on Ibn Kaspi and others, quoted by Jacob Guttmann, *Die religionsphilosophischen Lehren des Isaak Abravanel* (Breslau: M. & H. Marcus, 1916), pp. 34–6 and 71. [For a different perspective on Abravanel's attitude toward Maimonides and such philosophic commentators as Ibn Kaspi, see Eric Lawee, “‘The Good We Accept and the Bad We Do Not’: Aspects of Isaac Abarbanel’s Stance towards Maimonides,” in *Be’erot Yitzhak: Studies in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. Jay M. Harris (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 119–60.]

9. See his commentary on Joshua 10:12 (fol. 21, col. 2). I have used Abravanel's commentary on Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings in the Frankfort edition of 1736.

10. Cf. Abravanel, *Rosh Amanah*, ch. 22, with Maimonides' *Guide* 2.25, beginning, and 3.25, end. [For an English translation, see: Isaac Abravanel, *Principles of Faith (Rosh Amanah)*, trans. and ed. Menachem M. Kellner (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982), chap. 22, pp. 190–93. The conventional reading makes Abravanel's defense of Maimonides' “entire project of creed formulation” halt sharply at chap. 22. Kellner asserts (pp. 31–36) to the contrary that “far from turning around to attack Maimonides, [beginning in chap. 23] . . . Abravanel continues to defend him.” This especially concerns Strauss's main point about *creatio ex nihilo*, as it had been the focus of Maimonides on the difference between philosophy and the Torah. For Abravanel, it is absolutely prior, as he states unambiguously in the following (pp. 192–93):

Were I to choose principles to posit for the divine Torah I would only lay down one, the creation of the world. It is the root and foundation around which the divine Torah, its cornerstones, and its beliefs revolve and includes creation at the beginning, the narratives about the Patriarchs, and the miracles and wonders which cannot be believed without belief in creation. So, too, with belief in God's knowledge and providence, and reward and punishment according to (one's observance of) the commandments, none of which can one perfectly believe without believing in the volitional creation of the whole world. . . . So, too, Maimonides, at *Guide* 2.13 wrote that belief in the creation of the world ‘is undoubtedly a basis of the Torah of Moses our Master. . . . Nothing other than this should come to your mind.’ . . . It is thus shown to you from the words of these rabbis that belief in the creation of the world is a great principle of our Torah.]

interpretation of Maimonides' philosophical work: whether the discussion of the question of creation expresses Maimonides' own opinion in a direct way, or whether it is in the service of the "defense of the law." However one may answer this question, the very question itself implies the recognition of the fact that the literal teaching of the *Guide* is most decidedly in favor of the belief in creation. Now while Maimonides carefully maintains this belief, on which all other beliefs peculiar to the law depend, he takes a rather hesitating, if not self-contradictory position, as regards those other beliefs, i.e., as regards belief in the miracles, in revelation, in the immortality of the soul, in individual providence, in resurrection. If he actually believed in *creatio ex nihilo*, he was as little under a stringent necessity to deprecate those beliefs, or to restrict their bearing, as were the Christian scholastics, who also had combined Aristotelianism with the belief in creation, and who accepted the Christian dogma as a whole. Abravanel accepted Maimonides' explicit doctrine of the creation as true—he defended it in a special treatise (*Shamayim Hadashim*), and he knew Christian scholasticism. It was, therefore, only natural that he should have defended, and that he did defend, on the very basis of Maimonides' doctrine of creation and against his authority, all the other beliefs which are dependent on the belief in creation and which Maimonides had endangered. Thus, his criticism of Maimonides' dangerous doctrines is, in principle, not more than an immanent criticism of the literal teaching of the *Guide*; it is not more than a subsequent correction of that teaching in the sense of the Jewish traditional beliefs. It would not be much of an exaggeration to say that Abravanel's philosophical exertions as a whole are a defense of the Jewish creed, as drawn up by Maimonides in his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, against the implications, dangerous to this creed, of the teaching of the *Guide*.

The creed compiled by Maimonides was defended expressly by Abravanel in a special treatise (*Rosh 'Amanah*). This treatise, by itself perhaps the most striking evidence of the admiration which Abravanel felt for Maimonides, gives us a clear idea both of Abravanel's own tendency and of his interpretation of Maimonides. Maimonides' arrangement of the Jewish beliefs, the so-called "Thirteen Articles of Faith," had been attacked by some later Jewish writers for philosophical as well as for religious reasons. Abravanel defends Maimonides against those critics by showing that Jewish orthodoxy is perfectly defined by the recognition of just those thirteen articles which Maimonides had selected, and that the order of those articles is completely lucid. As regards the latter point, Abravanel asserts that the former part of

those articles indicates the beliefs common to philosophy and law, while the latter part is concerned with those beliefs which either are not accepted, or which are even contested, by the philosophers.¹¹ It is not necessary for our purpose to dwell on the detail of Abravanel's arguments. One point only must be stressed. After having devoted twenty-two chapters to defending Maimonides' compilation, Abravanel rather abruptly explains, in the two concluding chapters of his treatise, that a creed as such is incompatible with the character of Judaism as a divinely given law. For since any and every proposition of the law, any and every story, belief, or command contained in the law, immediately proceeds from revelation, all those propositions are of equal value, and none of them ought to be thought of as more fundamental than any other. Abravanel does not think that by holding this opinion he is in conflict with the teaching of Maimonides; strangely enough, he asserts that that opinion was shared by Maimonides himself. According to Abravanel, Maimonides selected the thirteen more general articles of belief for the use of the vulgar only, who are unable to grasp the whole doctrine of faith. To prove this statement, he contends that Maimonides mentioned those articles only in his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, i.e., in an elementary work which he wrote in his youth, but not in the *Guide*, in which he treats the philosophy of the Jewish law in a scientific way. Now this contention is not only wrong, but it is contradicted by Abravanel himself. He asserts, in the same treatise,¹² that the articles of belief—the first eleven out of the thirteen explicitly, the last two implicitly—occur as such in the philosophical first part of Maimonides' codification of the Jewish law (in the “*Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*”); and in another writing of his,¹³ he explains the decisive influence exercised by the articles of belief on the whole composition of the *Guide*. But however this may be, it is certain that Abravanel, by denying the possibility of distinguishing between fundamental and nonfundamental beliefs, actually undermines

11. *Rosh Amanah*, ch. 10. [See *Principles of Faith*, trans. Kellner, chap. 10, pp. 98–105, and especially pp. 100–102.]

12. Ibid., ch. 19. [See *Principles of Faith*, trans. Kellner, chap. 19, pp. 166–72, and especially p. 168: “By careful study of those chapters in ‘*Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*,’ you will find references to all the principles and foundations. They are not presented here, however, in the same order in which they are presented in the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, according to the intention of each place, as I have indicated.”]

13. *Ma'amar Katzer be-Bi'ur Sod ha-Moreh*. [See Isaac Abravanel, “Short Treatise in Elucidation of the Secret Meaning of the *Guide*” (in Hebrew). It is printed at the end of the standard traditional edition, with numerous printings, of *Sefer Moreh ha-Nevukhim*, trans. Samuel ibn Tibbon, with the commentaries of Efodi (i.e., Profiat Duran), Shem Tov ben Joseph, Asher Crescas, and Isaac Abravanel, pp. 73a–74b in the standard edition pagination of part 3 (Warsaw, 1872; reprint, Jerusalem, 1960).]

the whole structure of the philosophy of the Jewish law which was built up by Maimonides.¹⁴ Abravanel has sometimes been blamed for the inconsistency of his thought. I cannot praise him as a very consistent thinker. But a certain consistency ought not to be denied him. Accepting the literal teaching of Maimonides' *Guide* and trying to correct that teaching in the sense of the traditional Jewish beliefs, he was consistent enough to draw the final conclusion from his premises: he contested, if only occasionally, the foundation on which every philosophy of the law divine ultimately rests. However deeply he may have been influenced by the philosophical tradition in general and by the philosophical teaching of Maimonides in particular, his thought was decisively determined, not by philosophy, but by Judaism as a tradition based on a verbally inspired revelation.

The unphilosophic, to some extent even antiphilosophic, traditionalism of Abravanel accounts for the fact that for him political philosophy loses the central importance which it had for Maimonides. From what has been said about Maimonides' philosophy of Judaism, it will have appeared that the significance which he actually attaches to political philosophy is in exact proportion to his rationalism: identifying the fundamental beliefs of Judaism with the fundamental tenets of philosophy means at the same time interpreting the beliefs peculiar to Judaism in terms of political philosophy; and it means, in principle, interpreting Judaism as a whole as a perfect law in the Platonic sense. Accordingly, a follower of Maimonides, who rejected the thoroughgoing rationalism of the latter, as did Abravanel, deprived by this very fact political philosophy of all its dignity. One cannot raise the objection against this assertion that the Christian scholastics, while far from being radical rationalists, did indeed cultivate political philosophy. For the case of those scholastics who were citizens of existing states was obviously quite different from the case of the Jewish medieval thinkers. For a medieval Jew, political philosophy could have no other field of application than the Jewish law. Consequently, the value which political philosophy could have for him was entirely dependent on how far he would accept philosophy in general

14. Cf. in this connection, [i.e.,] Abravanel's criticism of Maimonides' explanation of the Mosaic laws, see his commentary on 1 Kings 3:14 (fol. 210, col. 2) and his commentary on Deut. 12:28 (fol. 286, col. 4). (I have used Abravanel's commentary on the Pentateuch in the Hanau edition of 1710.) Cf. also his criticism of Gersonides' method of drawing maxims out of the biblical narratives in the introduction to the commentary on Joshua (fol. 5, col. 2). [For Abravanel's criticism of Gersonides' method of reading which issues in maxims, see Eric Lawee, "Isaac Abarbanel: From Medieval to Renaissance Jewish Biblical Scholarship," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, vol. II, *From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. Magne Sæbo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), pp. 190–214.]

and political philosophy in particular as a clue to the understanding of the Jewish law. Now according to Maimonides, the prophet who brought the law is a philosopher statesman, and at least the greater part of the Mosaic law is concerned with the "government of the city."¹⁵ Abravanel, on the other hand, denies that philosophy in general is of the essence of prophecy. As regards political philosophy in particular, he declares that the prophet does not stoop to such "low" things as politics and economics. He stresses in this connection the fact that the originator of the biblical organization of jurisdiction was not Moses, but Jethro.¹⁶ In making these statements, Abravanel does not contest that Moses, as well as the other prophets, exercised a kind of government. As we shall see later, he even asserts this expressly. But he obviously does not accept the view, presupposed by Maimonides, that prophetic government is a legitimate subject of political philosophy. Political philosophy, as he understands it, has a much more restricted field than it had for Maimonides; it is much more of the Aristotelian than of the Platonic type.¹⁷ Abravanel's depreciation of political philosophy, which is a consequence of his critical attitude towards Maimonides' rationalism, thus implies a decisive limitation of the content of political philosophy.

Political philosophy, as outlined by Maimonides, had dealt with three main topics: the prophet, the king, and the Messiah. According to Maimonides, the prophet as such is a philosopher statesman, and the highest prophet, Moses, was that philosopher statesman who was able to give the perfect, and consequently eternal, unchangeable law.¹⁸ As regards kingship, Maimonides teaches that the institution of a king is indispensable, and expressly commanded by the Mosaic law. The king is subordinate to the lawgiver; his func-

15. *Guide* 3.27–28. [See *Guide*, trans. Pines, 3.27–28, pp. 510–14.]

16. Commentary on I Kings 3:14 (fol. 211, col. 1). Cf. however the commentary on Exodus 18:13–27 (fol. 134, col. 2–3). [For Abravanel's comments on Jethro (Exodus 18:13–27), see *Medieval Political Philosophy*, ed. Lerner and Mahdi, pp. 259–61. For further discussion on the theme of Jethro in Abravanel, see also Avraham Melamed, "Jethro's Advice in Medieval and Early Modern Jewish and Christian Political Thought," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 2, no. 1–2 (Spring 5750/1990): 3–41.]

17. As regards Abravanel's knowledge of Aristotle's *Politics*, see J. F. Baer, "Don Yitzchak Abravanel: His Relation to Problems of History and Politics," in *Tarbiz* vol. 8, nos. 3–4 (June 1937): [241–59, and especially pp.] 241f., 245 n. 11, and 248. See also below, n. 47. [See now Avraham Melamed, "Isaac Abravanel and Aristotle's *Politics*: A Drama of Errors," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 5, nos. 3–4 (Fall 1993): 55–75. Melamed arrives at the firm result, through careful research, which Strauss offers only as a surmise: Abravanel did not know the *Politics* at firsthand, but made contact with it only through secondary sources, such as the commentary by Thomas Aquinas. See also below in the present chapter.] In his commentary on Genesis 10:1ff. (fol. 40, col. 1), Abravanel seems occasionally to adopt the Aristotelian doctrine of natural masters and servants.

18. Cf. *Guide* 1.54 with 2.39–40. [See *Guide*, trans. Pines, 1.54, pp. 123–28, with 2.39–40, pp. 378–85.]

tion is to force men to obedience to the law, to establish justice, and to be the military leader. He himself is bound by the law, and therefore subject both to punishment in case of transgression of the law and to instruction by the supreme court, the guardians of the law. The king has extraordinary powers in case of urgent necessity, and his claims both to honor and to glory are acknowledged by the law.¹⁹ The Messiah, as Maimonides conceives of him, is in the first instance a king, obedient to the law, and a successful military leader, who will rescue Israel from servitude, restore the kingdom of David in the country of Israel, establish universal peace, and thus create, for the first time in history, the ideal earthly condition for a life devoted to knowledge. But the Messiah is not only a king; he is at the same time a prophet of a rank not much inferior to that of the lawgiver Moses: the Messiah, too, is a philosopher king. Even according to the literal teaching of Maimonides, the Messiah does not work miracles, and the messianic age in general does not witness any alteration of the ordinary course of nature. It goes almost without saying that that age is not the prelude to the end of the visible world: the present world will remain in existence forever.²⁰ Thus we may define the distinctive features of Maimonides' messianology by saying that messianism, as he accepts it, is a rational hope rather than a superrational belief.²¹ Maimonides' rationalism accounts in particular for the fact that he stresses so strongly the character of the Messiah as a successful military leader—he does this most definitely by inserting his thematic treatment of messianology within that section of his great legal work which deals with “the kings and their wars.” For military ability or deficiency seems to be the decisive natural reason for the rise or decline of states. Maimonides, at any rate, thinks that the reason for the destruction of the Jewish state in the past was the neglect of the arts of war and

19. See *Guide* 2.40; 3.41 (Munk, p. 91a) and 3.45 (Munk, p. 98b), as well as “*Hilkhot Melakhim*” I, 3 and 8; III, *passim*; IV, 10, and V, 2. [For “*Hilkhot Melakhim*,” see “Laws Concerning Kings and Wars,” trans. Hershman, pp. 207 (I, 3), 209 (I, 8), 212–14 (III, *passim*), 216 (IV, 10), and 217 (V, 2). See *Guide*, trans. Pines, 2.40, pp. 381–85; 3.41, p. 562, and 3.45, p. 576.]

20. “*Hilkhot Melakhim*” XI–XII; “*Hilkhot Teshuvah*” IX; *Guide* 2.29. [“Laws Concerning Kings and Wars,” trans. Hershman, pp. 238–42 (XI–XII). For “*Hilkhot Teshuvah*,” see “Laws of Repentance,” trans. Hyamson, pp. 91a–92a (IX). See also *Guide*, trans. Pines, 2.29, pp. 344–46.]

21. Notice the distinction between “belief” and “hope” in “*Hilkhot Melakhim*” XI, 1. [“Laws Concerning Kings and Wars,” trans. Hershman, pp. 238–39 (XI, 1). In the key sentence, neither Maimonides’ original Hebrew nor Hershman’s English translation can be read quite precisely to contain the literal word “hope,” to which Strauss points as a significant Maimonidean distinction. (It no doubt contains the word “belief.”) However, one may say that this is a possible implication drawn from Maimonides’ words. To bring such a possible implication to light with greater clarity, one might translate the sentence (unlike Hershman) as follows: “Anyone who does not believe in it (i.e., those matters previously stated which pertain to the King Messiah), or who does not wait (i.e., hope) for his coming, denies not only the teachings of the prophets, but also the Torah of Moses our teacher.”]

conquest.²² Accordingly, he expects that military virtue and military ability will play a decisive part in the future restoration of the Jewish state.²³

It is a necessary consequence of Abravanel's antirationalist premises that he must exclude the two most exalted topics of Maimonides' political philosophy from the field of political philosophy properly speaking altogether. As regards the prophets, the prophetic lawgiver, and the law divine, he takes away their treatment from political philosophy by contesting the assertions of Maimonides that prophecy is a natural phenomenon,²⁴ and that philosophy belongs to the essence of prophecy.²⁵ For by denying this, he destroys the foundation of Maimonides' conception of the prophet as a philosopher statesman. The leadership of the prophet, as Abravanel sees it, is, just as prophecy itself is, of an essentially supernatural, and thus of an essentially superpolitical character. As regards the Messiah, Abravanel devoted to this theme a much more detailed and a much more passionate treatment than Maimonides had done.²⁶ Indeed, as we are informed by a most competent historian, Abravanel stressed in his writings the messianic hopes more than any other Jewish medieval author, and he was the first to give the messianic beliefs of Israel a systematic form.²⁷ This increase of the interest in eschatological speculation is explained by the fact that Abravanel was a contempo-

22. See his letter to the community at Marseilles. [See "Letter on Astrology," trans. Lerner, pp. 178–87, and especially pp. 179–80. See also "Note on Maimonides' *Letter on Astrology*," chap. 14 above.]

23. I am not competent to judge whether Maimonides' legal treatment of kings and wars is influenced by the Islamic conception of the "holy war." But it is certain that his stressing the importance of military virtue in his philosophic prophetology was influenced by the prophetology of the Islamic philosophers, who attach a much higher value to war and to the virtue of courage than Plato and Aristotle had done. Cf. *Revue des Études Juives* 100 (1936), pp. 19f. and 35f. [See "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi," chap. 5 below, sixth paragraph of section II, and n. 59. See also, for related and pertinent discussion, Joel L. Kraemer, "The *Jihad* of the *Falasifa*," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 10 (1987): 288–324. Consider also *Jihad in Medieval and Modern Islam: The Chapter on Jihad from Avroes' Legal Handbook "Bidayat al-Mudjtahid"*, ed. and trans. Rudolph Peters (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977).]

24. See Abravanel's commentary on *Guide* 2.32. [For translations of Abravanel's discussion and criticism of Maimonides' definition of prophecy as it appears in his commentary on *Guide* 2.32, see Alvin J. Reines, *Maimonides and Abrabanel on Prophecy* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1970), pp. 1–27.]

25. See, for example, commentary on I Kings 3:14 (fol. 210, col. 4).

26. In this connection, the fact has to be mentioned that some prophecies which, according to Maimonides, were fulfilled in the past, i.e., at a time comparatively near to their announcement, are interpreted by Abravanel as messianic prophecies. Cf. the interpretation given in *Guide* 2.29, of Isaiah 24:17ff. and Joel 3:3–5, with Abravanel's explanations of those passages in his commentary on the later prophets.

27. Baer, loc. cit., pp. 257–59. [This is a historical judgment that has been confirmed by Gershom Scholem: see n. 29 below. For a very different approach than Strauss's to Abravanel's messianism, see Eric Lawee, "The Messianism of Isaac Abarbanel, 'Father of the [Jewish] Messianic Movements of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,'" in *Millenarianism and Messianism in Early Modern European Culture*, vol. 1, *Jewish Messianism in the Early Modern World*, ed. Matthew Goldish and Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001), pp. 1–39.]

rary of the greatest revolutions in the history of the Jewish diaspora, and of that great revolution of European civilization which is called the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern period. Abravanel expected the coming of the Messiah in the near future. He saw signs of its imminence in all the characteristic features of his time, from the increase of heresies and unbelief down to the appearance of the “French disease.”²⁸ Reflections of this kind show that his messianistic view was not, as was at least to some extent that of Maimonides, of an evolutionist, but of a catastrophic character. It is hardly necessary to add that the messianic age is for Abravanel a period rich in miracles, the most impressive of them being the resurrection of the dead. That age, which is the age of universal peace, even among the animals, as predicted by Isaiah, lasts only for a limited time; it is followed by the end of the present world.²⁹ It is preceded by a most terrible war, the final war. That war is, however, not so much a war of liberation, fought and won by Israel as Maimonides had taught; it is rather an event like the capture of Jericho, as told in the book of Joshua: Israel is a looker-on at the victory rather than the

28. That disease is, according to Abravanel, probably meant in Zechariah 14:12 (see his commentary on that passage). [For Zechariah 14:12,

But this shall be the plague wherewith the Lord will smite all the peoples that have warred against Jerusalem: their flesh shall consume away while they stand upon their feet, and their eyes shall consume away in their sockets, and their tongue shall consume away in their mouth.

It is what the Italians of the sixteenth century called “the French disease,” and what the French of the sixteenth century called “the Italian disease,” i.e., syphilis.]

29. See Gershom Scholem’s remark in *Encyclopedia Judaica* vol. IX, col. 688. [Strauss was obviously not referring to the well-known English language *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), since the appearance of Strauss’s article on Abravanel much preceded it. Instead he refers to the unfinished German-language *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Berlin: Eshkol, 1928–34), ed. Jakob Klatzkin and Ismar Elbogen. Its first ten volumes appeared in print (from Aach to Lyra), but work on the project was halted because of the persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany. Gershom Scholem did not write the equivalent entry for the English-language *Encyclopedia Judaica*. The present editor was unfortunately not able to obtain access to a copy of the original *Encyclopedia Judaica* in order to check the German-language passage to which Strauss refers. But in his article, “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism,” Scholem makes the following comment, the last phrase of which addresses the point being made by Strauss (as well as further confirming the point Strauss made in n. 27):

The most important codifications of the messianic idea in later Judaism are the writings of Isaac Abravanel (circa 1500) and *The Victory of Israel* [or *The Eternity of Israel*, i.e., *Netzah Yisrael*] by the “High Rabbi Loew,” Judah Loew ben Bezalel of Prague (1599). The authors are not visionaries but writers who endeavor to embrace as a whole the legacy of ideas which has been transmitted in such contradictory traditions. Despite their otherwise reticent manner, they richly avail themselves of the apocalyptic traditions.

See *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays in Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1971), p. 33.]

victor.³⁰ Accordingly in Abravanel's description of the Messiah,³¹ the military abilities and virtues are, to say the least, not predominant.³² To him, the Messiah is certainly much more a worker of miracles than a military leader: the Messiah, not less than the prophets, belongs to the sphere of miracles, not of politics. Abravanel's messianology as well as his prophetology are essentially unpolitical doctrines.³³

Now these unpolitical doctrines belong, as it were, to the framework of what Abravanel himself would have called his political teaching, i.e., of his discussion of the best form of human government as distinguished from divine government. Since the unpolitical framework was to Abravanel doubtless incomparably more important than its political content, and since, besides, the understanding of the former is indispensable for the right appreciation of the latter, it will be proper for us to describe the background of his political teaching somewhat more exactly than we have done up to now. That background is not only of an unpolitical, but even of an antipolitical character. As has been shown recently by Professor [Yizhak] Baer,³⁴ Abravanel takes over

30. The "realistic" element of Abravanel's conception of the final war, i.e., his identification of the final war with the war which he thought to be imminent between the Christian nations of Europe and the Turks for Palestine, does not change the character of his conception as a whole. [For further discussion of Abravanel's messianic "realism," see Eric Lawee, "Israel Has No Messiah" in Late Medieval Spain," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 5 (1995): 245–79, and especially pp. 275–76.]

31. See his commentary on Isaiah 11.

32. Those qualities, I venture to suggest, are ascribed by Abravanel not so much to the Messiah (i.e., the Messiah ben David) as to the Messiah ben Joseph, a midrashic figure, not mentioned by Maimonides.

33. Restating the genuine teaching of the Bible against Maimonides' rationalistic and therefore political teaching, Abravanel goes sometimes farther in the opposite direction than does the Bible itself. The most striking example of this which occurs to me is his interpretation of Judges 1:19—Judah "could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley, because they had chariots of iron." Abravanel explains this passage in the following way: "Judah could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley, *not* because they had chariots of iron."

As regards the difference between Maimonides' political teaching and Abravanel's unpolitical teaching, I have to emphasize the following example. According to Maimonides, the main reason for the fact (told in Exodus 13:17f.) that God did not lead Israel on the direct way, through Philistia, to Palestine, was His intention of educating them in courage (*Guide* 3.24, p. 53a, and 3.32, pp. 70b–71a). According to Abravanel, on the other hand, the main reason was His intention to divide the sea for Israel and to drown the Egyptians (and there was no sea on the way through Philistia); see commentary on the passage (fol. 125, cols. 1–2). [See *Guide*, trans. Pines, 3.24, pp. 499–500, and 3.32, pp. 527–28.]

34. Loc. cit., pp. 248–53. I have to make only some slight additions to the ample evidence adduced by Baer: (a) Abravanel's description of the innocent life in the first period as a life "in the field" (Baer, p. 252) is literally taken over from Seneca, *Epistle* 90, § 42 (*agreste domicilium*). [See Seneca, *Epistles*, trans. Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), pp. 394–430, letter 90, "On the Role Played by Philosophy in the Progress of Man": *agreste domicilium* or "rude homes" (pp. 426–27).] (b) Abravanel uses in his commentary on Genesis 11:1ff. (fol. 42, col. 2) the doctrine of Posidonius, discussed by Seneca, of the government of the best and wisest men in the Golden Age, in a modified form;

from Seneca's 90th letter the criticism there developed of human civilization in general (of the "artificial" and "superfluous" things) and of the city in particular. Following Josephus and the Christian Fathers, he combines that Hellenistic teaching with the teaching, in important respects similar, of the first chapters of Genesis. He conceives of urban life and of coercive government, as well as of private property, as productions of human rebellion against the natural order instituted by God: the only life in accordance with nature is a state of liberty and equality of all men, and the possession in common of the natural goods, or, as he seems to suggest at another place,³⁵ the life "in the field," of independent families. This criticism of all political, "artificial" life does not mean that Abravanel intends to replace the conception of the city as of something "artificial" by the conception of the nation as of something "natural"; for, according to Abravanel, the existence of nations, i.e., the disruption of the one human race into a plurality of nations, is not less "artificial," not less a result of sin, than is the existence of cities.³⁶ Thus, his criticism of political organization is truly all-comprehensive. And the ultimate reason of this antipolitical view is Abravanel's antirationalism, the predominance in his thought of the belief in miracles. It is true he accepts the classical teaching

he says that in the first period of the world, divine providence extended itself without any intermediary over mankind, and that, therefore, there were then always wise men, versed in theology. Cf. also Seneca, *Epistle* 90, § 44. [See letter 90, trans. Gummere, para. 44, pp. 428–29: "But no matter how excellent and guileless was the life of the men of that age, they were not wise men; for that title is reserved for the highest achievement. Still, I would not deny that they were men of lofty spirit and—if I may use the phrase—fresh from the gods. For there is no doubt that the world produced a better progeny before it was yet worn out. However, not all were endowed with mental faculties of highest perfection, though in all cases their native powers were more sturdy than ours and more fitted for toil. For nature does not bestow virtue; it is an art to become good." (44. Sed quamvis egregia illis vita fuerit et carens fraude, non fuere sapientes, quando hoc iam in opere maximo nomen est. Non tamen negaverim fuisse alti spiritus viros et, ut ita dicam, a dis recentes; neque enim dubium est quin meliora mundus nondum effetus ediderit. Quemadmodum autem omnibus indoles fortior fuit et ad labores paratior, ita non erant ingenia omnibus consummata. Non enim dat natura virtutem: ars est bonum fieri.)] (c) The criticism of Cain as the first founder of the city (Baer, p. 251) is to be found also in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* I, § 62. [See Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, books I–IV, trans. Henry St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), Volume IV of the Loeb Complete Works of Josephus, pp. 28–29.] (d) Abravanel uses the general criticism of civilization most properly in his interpretation of Exodus 20:25 (fol. 143, col. 1). (e) The distinction between the three ways of life (the bestial, the political, and the theoretical life) (Baer, p. 251) is obviously taken from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095b17ff. That distinction had been applied to the three sons of Adam, in the same way as it is by Abravanel, by Maimonides; see *Guide* 2,30 and Efodi's commentary. [Efodi: "For there are, we may say, three prominent types of life—the (vulgar), the political, and thirdly the contemplative life. Now the mass of mankind are evidently quite slavish in their tastes, preferring a life suitable to beasts." See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), 1095b17ff. The passage of Efodi in the standard editions is on pp. 62b–63b. See *Guide* 2,30, p. 357.]

35. Commentary on Gen. 11:1ff. (fol. 41, col. 1–2).

36. Ibid. (fol. 42, cols. 1–2). According to Abravanel's usage, "nation" often has the meaning of "religious community"; he speaks, for example, of the "Christian nation." See, e.g., *Ma'yenei ha-Yeshu'ah xi*, 8, and commentary on I Kings 15:6 (fol. 250, col. 3).

of man's "natural" way of life in the beginning, in the Golden Age. But that "natural" state is understood by Abravanel to be of an essentially miraculous character.³⁷ It is highly significant that he finds an analogy of man's "natural" state in the life led by Israel in the desert,³⁸ where Israel had to rely entirely for everything on miraculous providence. Abravanel, as it were, interprets the "life in the fields," praised by Seneca and the Bucolics, in the spirit of Jeremiah's words (2:2): "I remember for thee the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals; how thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown." The "natural" state of mankind is in principle not less miraculous than the messianic age in which that natural state is to be restored. Maimonides, who held, to say the least, a rather hesitating attitude towards miracles, had adopted, without making any reservation apart from those made by Aristotle himself, the Aristotelian principle that man is naturally a political being; Abravanel, on the other hand, who unhesitatingly accepts all the miracles of the past and of the future, judges of man's political existence as being sinful in its origin, and not instituted, but only, as it were, reluctantly conceded to man, by God.³⁹ And, [as] he goes on to say, it is with the political and urban life as with the king.⁴⁰ That is to say, Abravanel's political teaching, his discussion of the value of monarchy, or more generally of the best form of human government, to which I am turning now, is only an application, if the most interesting application, of his fundamental conception, which is strictly antipolitical.

Abravanel deals with the question of the best form of human government in his commentaries both on Deut. 17:14f., i.e., on the law which seems to command to Israel the institution of a king, and to I Sam. 8:6f., i.e., on the narration that God and the prophet Samuel were offended by the fact that Israel did ask Samuel for a king.⁴¹ The question is for Abravanel thus primarily

37. Cf. above n. 34, point (b), with commentary on Joshua 10:12 (fol. 21, col. 3).

38. Commentary on Genesis 11:1ff. (fol. 41, col. 3). Cf. also commentary on Exodus 18:13–27 (fol. 134, col. 2) on the connection between the absence of slavery among the Israelites while they were wandering through the desert (i.e., between their being then in a state of "natural" equality) and their miraculous maintenance by the manna.

39. Bound by Genesis 2:18, however, he occasionally adopts that Aristotelian proposition. See Baer, loc. cit., pp. 249f.

40. Commentary on Genesis 11:1ff. (fol. 41, col. 3).

41. The treatment of the question is in both versions (in the earlier version in the commentary on I Samuel 8:6f. [fol. 91, col. 2; fol. 93, col. 4], and in the later version in the commentary on Deuteronomy 17:14f. [fol. 295, col. 2; fol. 296, col. 2]) identical as regards the tendency, and even, to a large extent, literally identical. The earlier version is the more important as regards the details of the criticism of kingship; but only the later version provides us with an insight into Abravanel's conception of the ideal government as a whole: his explanation of Deuteronomy 17:14f. is only the continuation of his statements concerning the government of the Jewish nation in general, which are to be found in his interpretation of Deuter-

an exegetical one: how are the two apparently opposed passages of the Bible to be reconciled? Proceeding in the scholastic way, Abravanel begins with surveying and criticizing the earlier attempts, made by Jews and Christians,⁴² to solve that exegetical problem. He shows that all those attempts, in spite of their divergencies, and apart from the individual deficiencies of each of them, are based on one and the same decisive assumption. All the earlier commentators mentioned by Abravanel assumed that Israel's asking for a king was a sin, not as such, but only because of the manner or circumstances of their demand. In other words, those commentators presupposed that Deut. 17:14f. expresses a divine command to institute a king. This, however, includes the further presupposition that monarchy is a good, nay, that it is the best form of human government; for God would not have given His nation any political constitution but the best. Consequently, Abravanel has to discuss first whether monarchy is indeed the best form of human government, and secondly whether the meaning of Deut. 17:14f. is that Israel is commanded to institute a king.

The first discussion is a criticism, based on reason only, of the monarchist teaching of *the* philosophers, i.e., of Aristotle⁴³ and his medieval followers. That discussion is, unfortunately, far from being of scholastic orderliness and precision.⁴⁴ But the main argument is quite clear. The philosophers who are criticized by Abravanel asserted the necessity of monarchic government by comparing the relation of the king to the political community with the relation of the heart to the human body, and with the relation of the First Cause to the universe.⁴⁵ Against such kinds of proof Abravanel objects that

onomy 16:18ff. These statements have not been taken into account by Baer, nor by Ephraim E. Urbach, "Die Staatsauffassung des Don Isaak Abrabanel," in *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 81 (1937): 257–70, who come, therefore, to conclusions more or less different from those set forth in the present article. [For an English translation of Abravanel's commentary on Deut. 17:14–20, see "On Kingship," in *Abravanel on the Torah: Selected Themes*, ed. and trans. Avner Tomaschoff (Jerusalem: Jewish Agency for Israel, 2007), pp. 421–40. For some of what Abravanel writes on kingship in his commentary on I Samuel 8, see *Medieval Political Philosophy*, ed. Lerner and Mahdi, pp. 265–68; for some of his comments on Deuteronomy 17, see in the same book, pp. 261–64.]

42. The three opinions of Christian commentators, which are dealt with in the earlier version, are not, however, discussed in the later version.

43. See commentary on I Samuel 8:6f. (fol. 92, col. 1).

44. It has been made somewhat more lucid in the later version.

45. Those comparisons were known to Abravanel not only from Christian sources, but also and primarily from Jewish and Islamic ones. In his commentary on Exodus 18:13–27 (fol. 134, col. 2) he expressly refers to Farabi's *Principles of the Beings* (i.e., to the Hebrew translation of *k. al-siyyasat al-madaniyya*) as proving the necessity of hierarchy leading up to one chief, and in the sentence immediately following that reference, he mentions the examples of the hierarchy in the human body, and of the universal hierarchy which leads up to the First Cause. (Cf. Farabi, loc. cit., ed. Hyderabad, 1346 A.H., p. 54, and *Musterstaat*, ed. F. Dieterici, pp. 54ff. See also Maimonides, *Guide* 1.72.) In the passage mentioned, Abravanel accepts

they are based on a *metabasis eis allos genos* [shifting from one genus to another], on a *metabasis* from things natural and necessary to things merely possible and subject to the human will. Those philosophers tried further to prove the necessity of monarchic government by contending that the three indispensable conditions of well-ordered government are fulfilled only in a monarchy. Those conditions are: unity, continuity, and absolute power. As regards unity, Abravanel states that it may well be achieved by the consent of many governors.⁴⁶ As regards continuity, he doubts whether the annual change of governors, who have to answer for their conduct of public affairs after the expiration of their office, and who are, therefore, restrained by “fear of flesh and blood” (*mora' basar va-dam*) and by their being ashamed of their crimes becoming publicly denounced and punished, is not much to be preferred to the irresponsible, though continuous, government of one. As regards absolute power, Abravanel denies altogether that it is indispensable or desirable: the power of the governors ought to be limited by the laws. He adduces further in favor of the government of many, the principle of majority, as accepted by the Jewish law in matters of the interpretation of the law, and the statement made by Aristotle “in the beginning of the *Metaphysics*” that the truth is more easily reached by the collaboration of many than by the exertions of one.⁴⁷ After having thus disposed of the philosophic arguments in

those examples and the monarchist consequence derived from them, while he rejects them in his commentary on Deuteronomy 17:14f. and on I Samuel 8:6f. [See Farabi, “The Political Regime,” trans. Najjar, in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, ed. Lerner and Mahdi, pp. 39–40; *Perfect State*, trans. Walzer, pp. 230–33. In the sentence to follow, Strauss speaks of Abravanel’s use of a logical argument to refute the philosophers among his exegetical opponents in biblical interpretation with regard to anointing a king: he claims they commit a *metabasis eis allos genos* by allowing themselves to compare a king in the city to the First Cause of the universe. This is the error in logic of an unacknowledged shift from one genus to another, that being a most serious error if one is trying to genuinely demonstrate a truth. See Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, bk. 1, chap. 7, 75a38–75b20.]

46. Cf. Marsilius of Padua, *Defensor pacis*, lib. I, cap. 15, § 2. [See Marsilius of Padua, *Defensor pacis*, trans. Alan Gewirth (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956, 2001), discourse 1, chap. XV, § 2, pp. 61–62.]

47. The passage which Abravanel has in mind is the beginning of *Metaphysics* α or II (993a30–993b19). I wonder why he did not quote such more suitable passages as *Politics* III, 16 (1287b), and VII, 14 (1332b–1333a). It may be that he knew the *Politics* only from quotations. [For whether Abravanel knew the *Politics*, see Melamed, “Isaac Abravanel and Aristotle’s *Politics*” (n. 17 above).]

[The investigation of the truth is in one way hard, in another easy. An indication of this is found in the fact that no one is able to attain the truth adequately, while, on the other hand, no one fails entirely, but every one says something true about the nature of things, and while individually they contribute little or nothing to the truth, by the union of all a considerable amount is amassed. Therefore, since the truth seems to be like the proverbial door, which no one can fail to hit, in this way it is easy, but the fact that we can have a whole truth and not the particular part we aim at shows the difficulty of it. Perhaps, as difficulties are of two kinds, the cause of the present difficulty is not in the facts but in us. For as the eyes of bats are to the blaze of day, so is the reason in our

favor of monarchy, Abravanel turns to the teaching of experience; for as Aristotle “has taught us,” “experience prevails over the syllogism.” Now the experience of the present shows that such states as Venice, Florence,⁴⁸ Genoa, Lucca, Siena, Bologna and others, which are governed, not by monarchs, but by “judges” elected for limited periods of office, are much superior to the monarchies, as regards both administration of justice and military achievements. And the experience of the past teaches that Rome, when governed by consuls, conquered the world, while it declined under the emperors. In eloquent sentences which betray a deep hatred of kings and their ways, Abravanel contrasts the admirable character of classical or modern republics with the horrors of monarchies. He arrives at the conclusion that the existence of a king is not only not necessary for a political community, but that it is even

soul to the things which are by nature most evident of all. It is just that we should be grateful, not only to those whose opinion we may share, but also to those who have expressed more superficial views; for these also contributed something, by developing before us the powers of thought. It is true that if there had been no Timotheus we should have been without much of our lyric poetry; but if there had been no Phrynis there would have been no Timotheus. The same holds good of those who have expressed views about the truth; for from the better thinkers we have inherited certain opinions, while the others have been responsible for the appearance of the better thinkers. (See *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984], α or II 993a30–993b19, vol. 2, pp. 1569–70.)]

48. Cf. Leonardo Bruni, *Oratio in funere Nannis Strozae* (in Baluzius, *Miscellanea*, III, pp. 230ff.): “Forma reipublicae gubernandae utimur ad libertatem paritatemque civium maxime omnium directa: quae quia aequalissima in omnibus est, popularis nuncupatur. Neminem unum quasi dominum horremus, non paucorum potentiae inservimus. . . . Monarchiae laus veluti ficta quaedam et umbratilis (est), non autem expressa et solida. . . . Nec multum secus accidit in dominati paucorum. Ita popularis una relinquitur legitima reipublicae gubernandae forma, in qua libertas vera sit, in qua aequitas juris cunctis pariter civibus, in qua virtutum studia vigere absque suspicione possint. . . . Ingeniis vero ac intelligentia sic valent cives nostri ut in ea quidem laude pares non multi, qui vero anteponendi sint, nulli reparianter. Acritas quidem inest atque industria, et in rebus agendis celeritas et agilitas, animique magnitudo rebus sufficiens. Nec in moderanda republica solum nec in domestica tantum disciplina . . . valemus, sed etiam bellica gloria insignes sumus. Nam majores quidem nostri . . . finitos omnes populos virtute bellica superarunt. . . . Nostra semper civitas . . . scientissimos rei militaris duces procreavit.” [“The constitution we use for the government of the republic is designed for the liberty and equality of indeed all the citizens. Since it is egalitarian in all respects, it is called a ‘popular’ constitution. We do not tremble beneath the rule of one man who would lord it over us, nor are we slaves to the rule of the few. . . . This is why praise of monarchy has something fictitious and shadowy about it, and lacks precision and solidity. . . . Nor is it very different under the rule of the few. Thus the only legitimate constitution left is the popular one, in which liberty is real, in which legal equity is the same for all citizens, in which pursuit of the virtues may flourish without suspicion. . . . In talent and intelligence our citizens are so capable that they have few equals, and no superiors. They possess shrewdness and industry, and an ability to do things with speed and agility, and sufficient breadth of conception for the proper conduct of affairs. . . . We also have a reputation for military glory. . . . For our ancestors . . . with their warlike virtue conquered all their neighbors. . . . Our city has moreover . . . produced the leaders best versed in military science.” See “Oration for the Funeral of Nanni Strozzi,” in *The Humanism of Leonardi Bruni: Selected Texts*, trans. Gordon Griffiths, James Hankin, and David Thompson (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1987), pp. 124–26.]

an enormous danger and a great harm to it, and that the origin of kingdoms is not the free election of the king by the people, but force and violence.⁴⁹

In spite of his strong indictment of monarchic government, Abravanel no less strongly contends that, if in a country a monarchy exists, the subjects are bound to strict obedience to the king. He informs us that he has not seen in the writings of Jews a discussion of the question whether the people has the right to rebel against the king, or to depose him in case the king becomes a tyrant, and that the Christian scholars who did discuss that question, decided that the people had such a right, according to the classical precedent of the defection of the ten tribes from Rehoboam. Abravanel, who had spoken about this subject “before kings with their wise men,” judges that the people has no right to rebellion or deposition, even if the king commits every crime. For the people has, when crowning the king, made a covenant with him by which it promised to him obedience; “and that covenant and oath was not conditional, but absolute; and therefore he who rebels against the king is guilty of death, whether the king is righteous or wicked; for it is not the people that inquires into the king’s righteousness or wickedness.” Besides, the king represents God; he is an image of God as regards both absolute power (the extralegal actions of the king correspond to the miracles) and unity (the king is unique in his kingdom, as God is unique in His universe). The king is therefore entitled to a kind of honor which has something in common with

49. Cf. John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, lib. IV, cap. 11: “Regum scrutare historiam, ad hoc petitum regem a Deo invenies, ut praecederet faciem populi. . . . Qui tamen non fuerat necessarius, nisi et Israel praevaricatus esset in similitudinem gentium, ut Deo rege sibi non videretur esse contentus. . . . Hospitem meum Placentinum dixisse recolo . . . hoc in civitatibus Italiae usu frequenti celeberrimum esse, quod dum pacem diligunt, et iustitiam colunt, et periuris abstinent, tantæ libertatis et pacis gaudio perfruuntur, quod nihil est omnino, quod vel in minimo quietem eorum concutiat. . . . Adiciebat etiam quod merita populi omnem evacuant principatum, aut eum faciunt esse mitissimum. . . .” [“Scrutinize the history of kings, you will find that a king was sought from God for the reason that he might lead in the sight of the people. . . . Still he was not necessary, except that Israel was a transgressor in the manner of the Gentiles, insofar as it did not seem to be content with God for its king. . . . I recall that my host at Placentia, . . . had said that it was famous from the recurrent experiences of the Italian cities that so long as they cherished peace and cultivated justice and refrained from perjury, they enjoyed fully and rejoiced in such liberty and peace that there was nothing at all, or very little, which disturbed their calm. . . . He had also added that the merits of the people cancel all princely regimes or they are administered with the greatest mildness . . .” See John of Salisbury, *Policraticus: Of the Frivolity of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers*, trans. Cary J. Nederman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), bk. IV, chap. 11 (“What utility princes may acquire from the cultivation of justice”), p. 60.] Ibid., lib. VIII, cap. 17: “Nisi enim iniquitas, et iniustitia . . . tyrannidem procurasset, omnino regna non essent, quae . . . iniquitas aut per se praesumpsit, aut extorsit a domino.” [“For unless iniquity and injustice had advanced tyranny, . . . there would be absolutely no kingdoms, for . . . these were iniquitous in themselves; they either encroached upon or were extorted from God.” See John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, trans. Nederman, bk. VIII, chap. 17 (“In what way the tyrant differs from the prince; and of the tyranny of priests; and in what way a shepherd, a thief, and an employee differ from one another”), p. 191.]

the honor owed by man to God. Consequently, any attempt on the side of the people to depose or to punish their king, is in a sense sacrilegious.⁵⁰ It is obvious that the second argument is contradictory to the assertions made by Abravanel two or three pages earlier, in his discussion of the value of monarchy. It would, however, be unfair perhaps to so prolific a writer as Abravanel to attach too much stress to his inconsistencies; and in particular to the present inconsistency.⁵¹ For if the second argument used by him in support of his thesis, that the people has no right to depose or punish a tyrannous king, is inconsistent with his denial of the value of monarchy, the thesis itself is perfectly consistent with his main contention, that monarchy as such is an enormous danger and a great evil.

Was, then, the political ideal of Abravanel the republic? He does not use a word which could be translated by “republic”; the kind of government which he praises is called by him government of “many.” This is very vague indeed. The statements occurring in his criticism of monarchy might convey the impression that his ideal was democracy. But, as we shall see later, he accepted the doctrine of the necessity of a “mixed” constitution. Thus, his ideal cannot have been a “pure” constitution of any kind. I believe we would not be wide of the mark if we defined his political ideal by saying that it was, like that of Calvin⁵² one or two generations later, an “aristocracy near to democracy.”⁵³ But in order to avoid any hypothesis, we shall do best to confine ourselves to the statement that Abravanel’s political ideal was the republic. For “republic” is a term of a polemic and negative character; it does not say more than “not

50. Commentary on Deuteronomy 17:16–20 (fol. 296, col. 4; fol. 297, col. 1). [For an English translation of Abravanel’s commentary on Deut. 17:14–20, see “On Kingship,” in *Abravanel on the Torah*, trans. Tomashoff, pp. 421–40.] Abravanel further adduces a third argument which, however, applies to Jewish kings only. Cf. also his commentaries on Judges 4:9 (fol. 46, col. 1); on I Kings 2:37 (fol. 202, col. 3); on I Kings 13:2 (fol. 246, col. 1); and on I Kings 12 *passim*.

51. Cf. also above n. 45. Another example of this kind of inconsistency may be mentioned in passing. In his commentary on I Samuel 8:7 (fol. 93, col. 4), i.e., only two or three pages after he had finished the proof that the existence of a king is not necessary in any nation, Abravanel says: “the king is necessary for the other nations” (for all nations except Israel).

52. *Institutio*, lib. IV, cap. 20, § 8 (with regard to the Jewish commonwealth). [See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1875; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), vol. II, bk. fourth, chap. XX, “Of Civil Government,” para. 8, pp. 656–57. See also Baer, loc. cit., p. 259, and Lawee, “Israel Has No Messiah,” loc. cit., p. 257, n. 127.]

53. The aristocratic element in the ideal constitution, as conceived by Abravanel, i.e., of the Jewish constitution, is the *Synhedrion* [i.e., Sanhedrin] of 70. Cf. also commentary on Exodus 18:13–27 (fol. 134, col. 3). Abravanel’s ideal is characterized as “*status aristocraticus*” [an aristocratic government] by Menasseh ben Israel, *Conciliator*, qu. 6, ad Deut. [17: 14, 5] (Frankfort, 1633, p. 227). [See Menasseh ben Israel, *The Conciliator: A Reconciliation of the Apparent Contradictions in Holy Scripture*, trans. Elias Hiam Lindo (London: Duncan and Malcolm, 1842; reprint, New York: Hermon Press, 1972), vol. I, pp. 285–89, and especially p. 288.]

monarchy," without defining whether that nonmonarchical government desired is democratic, aristocratic, oligarchic, and so on.⁵⁴ And what Abravanel says of the best form of human government is hardly more than just this: that it is unmonarchical.

But was the political ideal of Abravanel really the republican city-state? That this was the case is most unlikely from the outset. If it were the case, it would betray not only inconsistency—inconsistent Abravanel admittedly was—but even an almost insane looseness of thought. Indeed, it is inconceivable that the very man who, in accordance with his deepest theological convictions, judged the city to be the work of human wickedness, should have been at the same time a genuine and unreserved admirer of the worldly greatness of Rome and Venice. One cannot explain the contradiction by supposing that Abravanel was merely a humanist orator who was able to devote eloquent sentences to any subject. For, eloquent though he could be, he certainly was no sophist: he had a strong and sincere belief in the one truth. The only possible explanation is that Abravanel's admiration for the classical and modern city-states was not more than a tribute which he paid to the fashion of his time; that it was a sidetrack into which he was guided occasionally, if on more than one occasion, by the influence of humanism, but primarily by his disgust at kings and their worldly splendor, which had a deeper root than the humanist influence.

Before beginning to define the true character of Abravanel's political ideal, let us emphasize the fact that the exaltation of the republican city-state belongs to the discussion, based on reason only, of the best form of human government, i.e., to a mere prelude to the central discussion of it, which is based on the Scripture only. After what has been said about Abravanel's philosophical tendency, there is no need for a further proof of the assertion that only his interpretation of the teaching of the Scripture can provide us with his authentic conception of the ideal form of human government. What, then, does the Scripture teach concerning the human government of Israel?

This question is answered by Abravanel both precisely and lucidly. He begins by stating his thesis, which runs as follows: even if he granted that the king is useful and necessary in all other nations for the ordering of the

54. Cf. Montesquieu's definition in *De l'esprit des lois*, livre II, ch. 1. [See Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent (New York: Hafner Press, 1949), bk. II, chap. 1, p. 8: "There are three species of government: republican, monarchical, and despotic. . . . A republican government is that in which the body, or only a part of the people, is possessed of supreme power; monarchy, that in which a single person governs by fixed and established laws; a despotic government, that in which a single person directs everything by his own will and caprice. This is what I call the nature of each government."]

political community and for its protection—which, however, he does not grant, but even vigorously denies—even in that case the king would certainly not be necessary for the Jewish nation. For their king is God, and therefore they need, even incomparably less than the other nations, a king of flesh and blood. A king could be necessary for three purposes: for military leadership, for legislation, and for extraordinary power to punish the wicked. All those purposes are achieved in Israel in the most perfect way by God, who vouchsafes His particular providence to His elected nation. Thus, a king is not necessary in Israel. He is even most dangerous in Israel. Experience has shown that all the kings of Israel and most of the kings of Judah led Israel and Judah into idolatry, while the judges and the prophets were, all of them, God-fearing men. This proves that the leadership of “judges” is good, while that of kings is bad. The result, at which the discussion based on reason only had arrived, is confirmed by the scrutiny of the Scripture, and particularly of the biblical narratives. More exactly, that result has undergone, as a consequence of the scrutiny of the Bible, an important precision, which is at the same time an important correction: the ideal form of human government is not the republic as such, but a “republican” government, instituted and guided by God.⁵⁵

Arrived at this point, Abravanel has yet to overcome the greatest difficulty. The earlier Jewish commentators, whose views he had criticized to begin with, were no less familiar with the innumerable passages of the Bible which attribute the kingship to God than he himself was. They also remembered, no less well than he did, the evil which Israel and Judah had experienced under their wicked kings. But they remembered also the deeds and words of such God-fearing kings as David, the author of many Psalms, as Solomon, the author of the Song of Songs, and as Jotham, Hezekiah, and Josiah, who were “saints of the Highest.”⁵⁶ And even more important than this, the Messiah for whose speedy coming they prayed, was conceived of by them as a king. Now, as regards the last point, Abravanel was consistent enough to deny that the Messiah is a king properly speaking: the Messiah too is, according to him, not a king, but a prophet and a judge.⁵⁷ But this conception of the leadership of the Messiah is already based on the truly decisive assumption that the institution of a king in Israel was not expressly commanded by God. The earlier commentators were convinced that Deut. 17:14f. did express such a command. As long as the difficulty offered by that passage was not overcome,

55. See also Urbach, loc. cit., pp. 263f.

56. Cf. Abravanel's Introduction to his commentary on the Books of the Kings (fol. 188, col. 3).

57. See Baer, loc. cit., p. 259.

all other passages of the Bible which Abravanel might adduce in support of his thesis were of little weight. For none of those other passages contained a definite law concerning the institution of kingship in Israel.

Abravanel denies that Deut. 17:14f. expresses a command to institute a king in Israel. According to him, that passage merely gives permission to do this. We need not examine whether his interpretation is right or not. What matters for us is that the interpretation rejected by Abravanel was accepted as legally binding by Jewish tradition, which was as a rule decidedly in favor of monarchy. The traditional interpretation had been accepted in particular by Maimonides, who had embodied it in his great legal work [*Mishneh Torah*] as well as in his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* [*Book of the Commandments*].⁵⁸

58. It was accepted also, for example, by Nahmanides, Moses of Coucy, Gersonides, and Bahya ben Asher. (This is not to deny that Gersonides' and Bahya's statements in their commentaries on Deuteronomy 17:14f. are almost as much antimonarchical as those of Abravanel—there are a number of important literal concords between the statements of Abravanel and those of both Gersonides and Bahya—but still, both of them interpret the passage in question as conveying a command to institute a king.) As far as I know, the only Jewish medieval commentator who, in his commentary on Deuteronomy 17:14ff., expressly understands that passage as conveying a permission is Ibn Ezra. The exceptional character of Abravanel's interpretation is implicitly recognized by Moses Hayyim Alsheikh (*Mar'ot ha-Tzove'ot*, on I Samuel 8:6f.), who vigorously rejects that interpretation by referring himself to the Jewish tradition, and expressly by Menasseh ben Israel (*Conciliator*, ed. cit., p. 228), who says "*Haec opinio (i.e., Abravanelis) quamvis satis congrua verbis S. Scripturae, a multis tamen accepta non est, quia adversatur sententiae ac traditioni antiquorum.*" ["This opinion (i.e., Abravanel's) is highly consistent with the words of Scripture, but it is not accepted by many because it is opposed to the beliefs and the tradition of the ancients." See also *Conciliator*, trans. Lindo, vol. I, p. 289, which version allows Menasseh to comment that "this opinion, although it is very conformable to the text, as it is at variance with the tradition and the decisions of the ancients, is not generally received" (p. 289).] Abravanel's interpretation was tacitly accepted by Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* (Berlin, 1783), II, pp. 117ff. ["The people persisted in their resolution . . . and (they) experienced what the prophet had threatened them with. Now the constitution was undermined. . . . State and religion were no longer the same." See *Jerusalem*, trans. Allan Arkush (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1983), pp. 132–33; *Jerusalem*, in *Moses Mendelssohn Gesammelte Schriften Jubiläumsausgabe*, vol. 8, *Schriften zum Judentum*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Frommann-Holzboog, 1983), pp. 197–98], and rejected by S. R. Hirsch and by Buber-Rosenzweig. Cf. also Isaak (Yizḥak) Heinemann, *Philons griechische und jüdische Bildung: kulturvergleichende Untersuchungen zu Philons Darstellung der jüdischen Gesetze* (Breslau: Marcus, 1932; reprint, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1973), pp. 185f., and Urbach, loc. cit., p. 269. (The essay of Heinrich Heinemann in the *Jahrbuch der Jüdisch-literarischen Gesellschaft*, 1916, was not accessible to me.) [For a sustained critique of Strauss's argument about Abravanel, see David Polish, "Isaac Abravanel (1427–1509)," in *Give Us a King: Legal-Religious Sources of Jewish Sovereignty* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1989), chap. IX, pp. 119–49, and especially pp. 122, 129–38. Polish treats Abravanel as a representative medieval exponent of the classical Jewish sources and as a sound interpreter of Maimonides. He also rejects the view articulated by Strauss that the classical Jewish tradition is, generally speaking, staunchly and almost uniformly in favor of monarchy as a political regime, or at least monarchy in its righteous form. Based on a closer adherence to the view advanced by Abravanel, Polish raises numerous doubts about whether this leaning toward monarchy is so consistently or unambiguously maintained by the Jewish tradition, although it may well have been maintained consistently and unambiguously by Maimonides. For two recent treatments of the same topic, in which the discussion is further advanced, see Amos Funkenstein, "Political Theory," in *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 159–65; with the response by Aviezer Ravitzky, "Political Philosophy: Nissim of Gerona and Isaac Abrabanel," in *History and Faith: Studies in Jewish Philosophy* (Amsterdam:

According to the interpretation accepted by the Jewish tradition, Deut. 17:14f. would have to be translated as follows:

When thou art come unto the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein; and shalt say (or:⁵⁹ *then thou shalt say*), I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that are round about me; *Thou shalt in any wise set a king over thee.* Thou shalt set him king over thee, whom the Lord thy God shall choose: one from among thy brethren shalt thou set over thee: thou mayest not put a foreigner over thee, which is not thy brother.

According to Abravanel's interpretation, the passage in question would read as follows:

When thou art come unto the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein; and shalt say, I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that are round about me; *then thou shalt set him king over thee whom the Lord thy God shall choose:* one from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee: thou mayest not put a foreigner over thee, which is not thy brother.

According to the traditional interpretation, the purport of the law, contained in the passage, is that Israel is commanded to institute a king. According to Abravanel's interpretation, its purport is that, if Israel wishes to institute a king—and to do this, Israel is by the law implicitly permitted, but permitted only—then Israel may do it only in such and such a manner. Now Abravanel's interpretation, which is directly opposed to that of the Jewish tradition, is in substance identical with that implied in the Vulgate.⁶⁰ Abra-

J. C. Gieben, 1996), pp. 46–72. For Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, see “Laws Concerning Kings and Wars,” trans. Hershman, chap. 1, paras. 1–2, p. 207. As for his *Book of the Commandments*, the 591st law is to appoint a king of Israel; hence, it is enumerated as a divine commandment in the Torah; it is counted among the positive commandments.]

59. According to Nahmanides.

60. “Cum ingressus fueris terram, quam Dominus Deus tuus dabit tibi, et possederis eam, habitaveris in illa, et dixeris: Constituam super me regem, sicut habent omnes per curcuitum nationes; *eum constitues, quem Dominus tuus elegerit de numero fratrum tuorum. . . .*” [“When you will have entered the land that the Lord your God will give you and you will have possessed it and you will have dwelled in it and you will have said: I shall establish a king over myself just as have all the nations roundabout; *you will establish him whom your Lord will have chosen from the number of your brothers. . . .*” Latin translated by Sara Kathleen Alvis.] Cf. also the English translation: “. . . Thou shalt in any wise set him king over thee, whom the Lord thy God shall choose. . . .”

vanel is, of course, much more explicit than the Vulgate can be.⁶¹ And, apart from this, he goes much further than the Latin translation does. He says, explaining the passage in question more precisely:

(When thou shalt wish to do this), in spite of its not being proper, (thou mayest not do it but in such and such a manner). This is similar to the section of the law which runs as follows: When thou goest forth to battle against thine enemies, and the Lord thy God deliverest them into thine hands . . . and seest among the captives a beautiful woman, and thou hast a desire unto her. . . . For there the precept is not that he shall desire her, and not that he shall take her to him to wife . . . , since this is permitted only, and an effect of the wicked inclination. But the precept is that, after the first cohabitation, thou shalt bring her home into thine house. . . . Israel was not commanded in the Torah to ask for a king . . . , and the king was not necessary and indispensable for the government of their gatherings . . . , for God was their king truly. . . . Therefore, when Israel asked for a king . . . , the anger of the Lord was kindled against them, and He said: they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not be king over them; and Samuel said: ye said unto me, Nay, but a king shall reign over us; when the Lord your God was your king. This shows that the sin consisted in their “kicking” at God’s kingship and their choosing a human kingship. For this reason, neither Joshua nor the other Judges instituted a king.

The final expression of Abravanel’s interpretation is that Deut. 17:14f. contains a permission given “with regard to the wicked inclination” (*yezer ha-ra’*). Now this more precise expression, too, is in substance borrowed from a Christian source. That source is the *Postilla* of Nicholas of Lyra.⁶²

61. It will be proper to give a more complete (if partially free) rendering of Abravanel’s interpretation by putting his explanatory remarks on the biblical words into brackets. He explains: “When thou art come unto the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein (i.e., it will be foolish that in the time of the wars, during the conquest of the land you will not ask for a king; for this would be the most proper time for the need for a king; but after you will possess the land, and you will have divided it, and you will dwell in it in safety, and this will have happened by the providence of God, without there being then a king—then, without any necessity and need whatsoever) thou shalt say, I will set a king over me(, namely,) like as all the nations that are round about me (i.e., for no other necessity and purpose [but to assimilate yourselves to the nations of the world]; when this will happen), thou shalt (not) set (him) king over thee (whom you wish, but him) whom the Lord thy God shall choose. . . .” Commentary on I Samuel 8:6 f. (fol. 93, col. 2).

62. Nicholas says on Deuteronomy 17:14f.: “non est praeceptum, nec simplex concessio, quia sic non peccasset populus Israel petendo regem, cuius contrarium dicitur I Reg. 12: sed est permissio quae est de malo. Bonum enim populi consistebat in hoc, quod solus Deus regnaret super eum, eo quod erat populus pecularius Dei; veruntamen si importune regem habere vellent, permittebatur eis, sub conditionibus

tamen. . . ." ["It is not a precept nor a simple concession since the people of Israel would not have sinned thus by seeking a king, of which the contrary is said in 1 Kings 12: but it is a permission that is concerning evil. For the good of the nation was consisting in this, that God alone should rule over it in that this was a nation belonging to God; nevertheless if they were wishing to have a king persistently, it was permitted to them, though under conditions. . . ." Latin translated by Sara Kathleen Alvis.] This is explained more fully in the *Postilla* on 1 Kings 8: "illud quod dicitur Deut. 17 de constitutione regis . . . non fuit concessio proprie dicta, sed magis permissio, sicut repudium uxoris fuit permissum ad duritiam cordis eorum. . . ." ["That which is said in Deut. 17 about the establishment of a king . . . was not a concession properly stated, but rather a permission, just as the repudiation of a wife was permitted in accord with the hardness of their heart. . . ." Latin translated by Sara Kathleen Alvis.] The comparison shows that Abravanel has merely replaced Nicholas' example by the example of the "beautiful woman." But the point of view of Abravanel is identical with that of Nicholas. There is one important difference between the Jewish and the Christian commentator: while Abravanel thinks that monarchy is intrinsically bad, Nicholas is of the opinion that monarchy is in principle the best form of government. Nicholas only contests that that which holds true of all other nations, holds equally true of Israel, the nation governed by God. Only this part of Nicholas' argument has been taken over by Abravanel. (Cf. the beginning of Abravanel's discussion concerning monarchy in Israel: "Even if we grant, that the king is most necessary in the nation for the ordering of the political community . . . he is not necessary in the nation of Israel. . . .") Nicholas says on I Kings 8: "Ad maiorem praedictorum evidentiam quaeritur, utrum filii Israel peccaverint petendo super se regem. Et arguitur quod non, quia petere illud quod est bonum simpliciter, et de dictamine rationis rectae, non est peccatum; gubernatio autem populi per regem est optima, ut dicit Philosophus 3. Politicorum. et per consequens est de dictamine rationis rectae. . . . Item illud quod conceditur lege divina licitum est, quia nullum peccatum concedit, sed Deut. 17. c. concedit lex divina filii Israel constitutionem regis. . . ." ["For the greater proof of the argument, it is asked whether the sons of Israel sinned in seeking a king over themselves and it is argued not so since to seek that which is good simply and according to the dictate of right reason is not sin; moreover, the governance of a nation by a king is best, as the Philosopher says in book 3 of the *Politics* and consequently is in accord with the dictate of right reason. . . . Also, that which is granted by divine law is allowed since it grants no sin but in Deut. chap. 17 divine law grants to the sons of Israel the establishment of a king. . . ." Latin translated by Sara Kathleen Alvis.] (Notice that even in this "monarchist" objection, Deuteronomy 17:14f. is understood to contain a *concessio* only.) "Contra infra 12. c. dicitur: Scietis et videbitis. . . . Ad hoc dicendum quod, cum regnum sit optima politia, caeterae gentes a filiis Israel petendo vel constituendo super se regem non peccaverunt, sed magis bonum egerunt. Filii autem Israel hoc faciendo peccaverunt. . . . Cuius ratio est, quia Deus populum Israel elegit sibi specialem et peculiarem prae caeteris populis . . . et idem voluit esse rex immediatus illius populi . . . propter quod volunt homines gubernatores illius populi ab ipso immediate institui, tanquam eius vicarii essent, et non reges vel domini: ut patet in Moysi et Josue, et de iudicibus sequentibus. . . ." ["On the contrary subsequently in I Samuel chapter 12 (verse 17) it is said: 'You will know and you will see. . . .' In this regard it must be said that since kingship is the best polity the other nations have not sinned by seeking a king from the sons of Israel or by establishing a king over themselves, but rather they have accomplished a good thing. However, the sons of Israel did sin by doing this. . . . The reason for this is that God chose the people of Israel as special to Himself and preferred before other peoples . . . and He wished likewise to be the direct king of that nation . . . because He wished men to be established by Himself directly as governors of that nation such that they would be His representatives and not kings or rulers as it is made plain in Moses and Joshua and from the judges following after. . . ." Latin translated by Sara Kathleen Alvis.] (That Abravanel knew the *Postilla*, is shown by his express quotations from it—see Guttmann, loc. cit., p. 46. But, apart from that, that interpretation given by earlier commentators of Deuteronomy 17:14f. (or I Samuel 8:6f.), which he esteems most highly and which he discusses most fully, is the interpretation given by Paulus of Burgos, and this interpretation is to be found in Paulus' *Additiones* to the *Postilla*.) [See Nicolaus de Lyra, *Postilla super totam Bibliam* (Strassburg 1492; facsimile reprint, Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1971).] Cf. further Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II, 1, qu. 105, art. 1: "regnum est optimum regimen populi, si non corrumperatur. Sed . . . de facili regnum degenerat in tyrannidem . . . ideo Dominus a principio (Judeis) regem non instituit cum plena potestate, sed judicem et gubernatorem in eorum custodiam; sed postea regem ad petitionem populi quasi indignatus concessit, ut patet per hoc quod dixit ad Samuel I Reg. 8:7. . . . Institutum tamen a principio circa regem instituendum, primo quidem modum

Thus we are entitled to say that Abravanel's interpretation of Deut. 17:14f., i.e., of the chief biblical passage, or, in other words, that his opinion concerning the incompatibility of monarchy with the constitution of Israel, goes immediately back to Christian, not to Jewish sources.

Generally speaking, both the Jewish and the Christian tradition, and in particular both the Jewish and the Christian Middle Ages, were in favor of monarchy. Antimonarchist statements are, in both traditions, exceptional up to the humanist age. Thus one is at a loss to state which of the two traditions shows a comparatively stronger monarchist (or antimonarchist) trend than the other. One could, however, dare to make such a statement if it were based on a comparison of comparable magnitudes, i.e., of a Jewish source which is at the same time authoritative and popular, with the corresponding Christian source. Now if we compare the manner in which the Jewish Bible on the one hand (i.e., the Targum Onkelos, the Targum Jonathan, and the commentaries of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Nahmanides), and the Christian (Latin) Bible on the other (i.e., the *Glossa interlinearis*, the *Glossa ordinaria*, the *Postilla* of

eligendi . . . Secundo ordinavit circa reges institutos. . . ." [See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Cambridge: Blackfriars, 1976): "A kingdom is the best form of government of the people, so long as it is not corrupt. But . . . it easily degenerates into tyranny. . . . Hence from the very first the Lord did not set up (for the Jews) the kingly authority with full power, but gave them judges and governors to rule them. But afterwards when the people asked Him to do so, *being indignant with them, so to speak, He granted them a king*, as is clear from His words to Samuel (1 Samuel 8:7). . . . Nevertheless, as regards the appointment of a king, He did establish the manner of election from the very beginning. . . . He prescribed how the king after his appointment should behave. . . ."] The fact that the kings had absolute power, while the power of the judges was more limited, is stressed by Abravanel in the introduction to his commentary on Judges (fol. 40, col. 1). Cf. also John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, lib. VIII, cap. 18: ". . . primi patres et patriarchae vivendi ducem optimum naturam securi sunt. Successerunt duces a Moyses sequentes legem, et iudices qui legis auctoritate regebant populum; et eosdem fuisse legitimus sacerdotes. Tandem in furore Domini dati sunt reges, alii quidem boni, alii vero mali . . . populus . . . a Deo, quem contempserat, sibi regem extorsit . . . (Saul) tamen christus Dominus dictus est, et tirannidem exercens regium non amisit honorem. . . ." ["The first fathers and the patriarchs were in obedience to nature, the best guide to living. They were succeeded by leaders following the laws of Moses and by judges who ruled the people according to the authority of the law; and we read that these were priests. Finally, against the wrath of God, they were given kings, some good, yet others bad. . . . The people . . . had extorted a king for themselves from God, whose will was disregarded. . . . Yet the same man (Saul) was called the anointed of the Lord, and exercising tyranny, he did not lose the honor of kingship. . . ." See John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, trans. Nederman, bk. VIII, chap. 18 ("Tyrants are the ministers of God; and what a tyrant is; and of the moral characters of Gaius Caligula and his nephew Nero and each of their ends"), pp. 201-2.] With this passage, the whole of Abravanel's political teaching should be compared. As regards the later development, I would refer the reader particularly to Milton, *Pro populo Anglicano defensio contra Salmasii Defensionem Regiam*, cap. 2. It is interesting in our connection to observe that, while Salmasius (*Defensio Regia*, cap. 2) makes ample use of the rabbinic interpretations of Deuteronomy 17:14f. (and of I Samuel 8) for the proof of his royalist thesis, Milton much prefers Josephus to the "tenebrionibus Rabbinis" [rabbinical obscurities] (cf. on Josephus below, third paragraph from the end of the chapter). [See "Defence of the People of England Against Anonymous, Alias Salmasius (and) His 'Defence of the King,'" in John Milton, *Areopagitica and Other Political Writings*, ed. John Alvis (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), chap. II, pp. 125-54, and especially p. 128.]

Nicholas of Lyra, and the *Additiones* of Paulus Burgensis) deal with the chief passage, i.e., with the law concerning the institution of a king, we find that the Jewish Bible shows not the slightest sign of an antimonarchist tendency,⁶³ while the Christian Bible exhibits a definite antimonarchist trend, based on theocratic assumptions.⁶⁴ The only exception to this rule in the Christian Bible is the explanation of the passage in question given by Paulus of Burgos, i.e., by a baptized Jew. The result of this comparison confirms our impression that the immediate origin of Abravanel's antimonarchist conclusions from his theocratic premises has to be sought for not in Jewish, but in Christian, sources.

Of Christian origin is above all Abravanel's general conception of the government of the Jewish nation. According to him, that government consists of two kinds of governments, of a government human and of a government spiritual or divine. This distinction is simply the Christian distinction between the authority spiritual and the authority temporal. Abravanel further divides each of these two governments into three degrees. As regards the government human, the lowest degree is the "little *bet din*," i.e., the court of justice of every town. The members of those courts are elected by the people. The second degree of the government human is the "great *bet din*," i.e., the *Synhedrion* in Jerusalem. The members of the *Synhedrion* are not elected by

63. The Targum Onkelos renders the passage literally. The Targum Jonathan renders the words "Thou shalt in any wise set a king over thee, whom the Lord thy God shall choose: one from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee," in the following way: "You shall inquire for instruction before the Lord, and afterwards appoint the king over you." Rashi does not say anything on the passage. Ibn Ezra simply says that the passage expresses a permission; Nahmanides conceives of it as containing a command to ask for a king and to institute a king.

64. The *Glossa interlinearis* remarks on "et dixeris": "Tu non ego," and on "Constituam super me regem": "Non Deum sed hominem." [And you will have said: 'You, not I,' and on 'I shall establish a king over myself': 'Not God but man.' Latin translated by Sara Kathleen Alvis.] The *Glossa ordinaria* (Augustinus, qu. 26) says: "Quaeri potest cur displicuit populus Deo, cum regem desideravit, cum hic inventiatur esse permissus? Sed intelligendum est merito non fuisse secundum voluntatem Dei, quia hoc fieri non praecepit sed desiderantibus permisit." [It can be asked why the nation was displeasing to God when the people desired a king, since it is found here to be permitted? But it must be understood that deservedly the will of God was not favorable, since He did not command this to be done but He permitted it to those desiring a king.] Latin translated by Sara Kathleen Alvis.] As regards the *Postilla*, see above [n. 62]. Paulus Burgensis says: "Praeceptum istud de constitutione regis non est permissive intelligendum . . . sed est simplex concessio cum conditionibus in litera scriptis. Nec sequitur quod si sit concessio simplex, tunc non pecasset populus Israel petendo regem. Nam petierunt regem alter quam fuit sibi concessum." [That precept concerning the establishment of a king must not be understood as a permission . . . but it is a simple concession with conditions written out to the letter. Nor does it follow that if it were a simple concession, then the nation of Israel would not have sinned in seeking a king. For they sought a king otherwise than it was granted to them.] Latin translated by Sara Kathleen Alvis. See, in various editions and printings, *Biblia Latina, with the Glossa Ordinaria of Walafrid Strabo, the Glossa Interlineari of Anselm of Laon, the Postilla of Nicholas of Lyra, and the Additions of Paulus Burgensis*.]

the people, but nominated either by the king, or, if there is no king, by the president of the *Synhedrion*, after consultation with the other members; the president himself is chosen by the members of the *Synhedrion*. This body, being an image of the seventy elders led by Moses, consists of seventy-one persons. The highest place in human government is occupied by the king. The king is chosen by God, not by the people, who have therefore no right whatsoever to rebel against the king or to depose him. The office of the king is not the administration of justice, but, in the first instance, military leadership, and then the extrajudicial punishment of the wicked in cases of urgency. His claim to obedience and honor is stressed by Abravanel scarcely less than it is by Maimonides; in this respect both alike are simply following Jewish tradition.⁶⁵ If one takes into account Abravanel's criticism of monarchy in general and of monarchy in Israel in particular, one has to define his view concerning the highest degree of human government in the Jewish nation more exactly by saying that the chief of that government is, according to the original intention of the legislator, not a king properly speaking, but a leader of the kind that Moses and the Judges were. As a matter of fact, Abravanel expressly states that "the first king who reigned over Israel" was Moses.⁶⁶ At any rate, the human government of the Jewish nation, as Abravanel sees it, consists of a monarchic element (Moses and his successors), of an aristocratic element (the Sanhedrin), and of a democratic element (the local judges elected by the people). It is a "mixed" government, in full accordance with the classical doctrine. The immediate source of this view of Abravanel is again a Christian one: Thomas Aquinas's description of the Jewish constitution in the *Summa theologiae*,⁶⁷ which has been altered by Abravanel only in detail. So

65. Commentary on Deuteronomy 16:18–17:1, and on 17:8–15 (fol. 293, cols. 1–2; fol. 294, col. 1; fol. 296, cols. 2–3). Cf. commentary on I Kings 1 (fol. 196, col. 4) and Introduction to commentary on Judges (fol. 39, col. 3; fol. 40, col. 1). In the commentary on Deuteronomy 16:18–17:13 (fol. 293, col. 2 and fol. 294, col. 2), Abravanel says, however, that the extraordinary power of jurisdiction belongs, not to the king, but to the *Synhedrion*. Following the ruling of the Jewish tradition, he points out that all appointments in Israel are for life, and, in principle, hereditary (loc. cit., fol. 293, col. 2). In his "rational" discussion of the best form of human government, he showed a definite preference for short periods of office.

66. Commentary on I Kings 1 (fol. 196, col. 4). See also commentary on Exodus 18:13–27 (fol. 134, col. 1).

67. *Summa theologiae* II, 1, qu. 105, art. 1. Thomas defines the character of the government instituted by the *lex vetus* [the Old Law] by calling that government a "politia bene commixta ex regno, in quantum unus praest, ex aristocracia, in quantum multi principiantur secundum virtutem, et ex democracia, id est, potestate populi, in quantum ex popularibus possunt eligi principes, et ad populum pertinet electio principum. Et hoc fuit institutum secundum legem divinam; nam Moyses et ejus successores (i.e., Josua, Juges, et reges) gubernabant populum, quasi singulariter omnibus principantes, quod est *quaedam specie regni*. Eliebantur autem septuaginta duo seniores secundum virtutem . . . et hoc erat aristocraticum. Sed democraticum erat quod isti de omni populo eliebantur. . . ." ["For this is the best form of polity, being partly kingdom, since there is one at the head of all; partly aristocracy, in so far as a number of persons

much about Abravanel's conception of the government human. As regards the government spiritual, he again distinguishes three degrees: the prophet, who is the chief; the priests; and, in the lowest category, the Levites.⁶⁸ This distinction implies that the hierarchy spiritual, not less than the hierarchy human, leads up to a monarchical head. In this again Abravanel is following the teaching of the Christian Middle Ages, according to which the government of the whole church must be monarchical: he merely replaces Petrus [i.e., Peter] (or his successors) by the prophet.⁶⁹ The government spiritual, as conceived by Abravanel, is of course not purely monarchical; it contains also an aristocratic and, perhaps, a democratic element. This view of the spiritual hierarchy is also borrowed from Christians.⁷⁰ And it is for Abravanel no less a matter of course than it is for the papalist writers among the Christians, that human government, and in particular government by kings, which was not instituted by, but extorted from God, is much inferior in dignity to the government spiritual. And besides, the aristocratic element of the human government of the Jewish nation, the *Synhedrion*, consists as Abravanel points out mainly of priests and Levites.⁷¹ The ideal commonwealth, as understood by Abravanel, is governed mainly by prophets and priests; and the ideal leader is for him not, as for Maimonides, a philosopher king, but a priest king.⁷² His political ideal is of a strictly hierocratic character. He was, as far

according to virtue are set in authority; partly democracy, i.e., government by the people, in so far as the rulers can be chosen from the people, and the people have the right to choose their rulers. Such was the form of government established by the Divine Law. For Moses and his successors (i.e., Joshua, the judges, and the kings) governed the people in such a way that each of them was ruler over all; so that there was *a kind of kingdom*. Moreover, seventy-two men were chosen, who were elders in virtue . . . so that there was an element of aristocracy. But it was a democratic government in so far as the rulers were chosen from all the people. . . .” Cf. also the passage from the same article [of the *Summa theologiae*] quoted above, n. 62 [in the present chapter].

68. Commentary on Deuteronomy 16:18–17:1 (fol. 293, col. 1), and on 18:1–8 (fol. 297, cols. 1–2).

69. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, lib. IV, cap. 76. [Strauss may have had in mind especially bk. 4, chap. 76, para. 3: “3. None can doubt that the government of the Church is excellently well arranged, arranged as it is by Him through whom ‘kings reign and lawgivers enact just things’ (Prov. 8:15). But the best form of government for a multitude is to be governed by one; for the end of government is the peace and unity of its subjects, and one man is a more apt source of unity than many together.” See *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Joseph Rickaby (London: Burns and Oates, 1905).]

70. [See Robert] Bellarmine, *De Romano Pontifice*, lib. I, cap. 5: “Jam vero doctores catholici conueniunt omnes, ut regimen ecclesiasticum hominibus a Deo commissum, sit illud quidem monarchicum, sed temperatum . . . ex aristocracia et dimocratio.” [“Now in truth all learned Catholics agree that the ecclesiastical rule granted by God to men is indeed that monarchic one, but moderated . . . by aristocracy and democracy.” Latin translated by Sara Kathleen Alvis.]

71. Commentary on Deuteronomy 17:8–13 (fol. 294, cols. 2–3). [See *Medieval Political Philosophy*, ed. Lerner and Mahdi, pp. 261–64.]

72. Commentary on I Kings 1 (fol. 196, col. 4), and on Exodus 18:13–27 (fol. 134, cols. 1–2). Cf. John of Salisbury, *Policratius*, lib. VIII, cap. 18 (quoted above, n. 62 [in the present chapter], and Augustinus [de Ancona] *Triumphus*, *Summa de potestate ecclesiastica*, Pt. I, qu. 1, art. 7–8).

as I know, the first Jew who became deeply influenced by Christian political thought. It deserves to be stressed that he adopted the views of the extreme papalists. He had preferred Christian scholasticism to the philosophy of the Jewish rationalists, and he arrived at a political ideal which was nearer to the ideal of Gregory VII⁷³ and Innocent III than to that of Maimonides. He had undermined Maimonides' political philosophy of the law by contesting its ultimate assumption that the city is "natural," and by conceiving of the city as a product of human sin, i.e., he had started from unpolitical, and even anti-political premises, and he arrived at the political creed of clericalism.

But however great the influence of Christian medieval thought on Abravanel's political teaching may have been, that influence scarcely accounts for his so-called republicanism. This part of his political creed is not of Christian medieval, but of humanist origin. Humanism means going back from the tradition to the sources of the tradition. *The sources*, however, are for Abravanel, not so much the historians, poets, and orators of classical antiquity, but the literal sense of the Bible—and Josephus.⁷⁴ Josephus understood Deut. 17:14f. as permitting only, not commanding, the institution of a king. And he unequivocally states that the government instituted by Moses was an aristocracy as opposed to a monarchy.⁷⁵ Above all, the *aristoi*, who govern the Jewish state, are identified by him with the priests, whose chief is the high priest.⁷⁶ Thus we conclude that Abravanel's view of the Jewish government as a whole is taken over from Josephus. And by taking into account the result of our previous analysis, we shall sum up by saying that Abravanel restates the aristocratic and antimonarchist view of Josephus in terms of the Christian distinction between the authority spiritual and the authority temporal.

When speaking of the influence of humanism on Abravanel's political teaching, we have, then, to think not primarily of his "republicanism"—of

73. Cf. with Abravanel's statements those of Gregory VII and others, quoted by Robert Warrant Carlyle and Alexander James Carlyle, *A History of Mediaeval Political Theory in the West*, III (2nd ed., Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1936), pp. 94 and 99.

74. As regards Abravanel's knowledge of Josephus, see Baer, loc. cit., p. 246. [See also Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abrabanel's Stance toward Tradition: Defense, Dissent, and Dialogue* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 199.]

75. *Antiquitates Judaicae*, lib. IV, § 223, and lib. VI, § 35. [See Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, bks. I–IV, trans. Henry St. J. Thackeray, vol. IV of *Loeb Complete Works of Josephus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), pp. 582–83; *Jewish Antiquities*, bks. V–VIII, trans. Henry St. J. Thackeray and Ralph Marcus, vol. V of *Loeb Complete Works of Josephus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), pp. 182–83.]

76. See in particular *Contra Apion*, lib. II, 185–88 and 193–94, but also *Antiquitates Judaicae*, lib. IV, §§ 218 ("high priest, prophet, and *Synhedrion*") and 224. [See Josephus, *Against Apion*, trans. Henry St. J. Thackeray, volume I of *Loeb Complete Works of Josephus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), bk. II, pp. 366–69; *Jewish Antiquities*, bks. I–IV, pp. 580–81, and 582–83.]

his admiration for the greatness of republican Rome and for the patriotism of its citizens—which is rather on the surface of his thought. His humanism has indeed hardly anything in common with the “heathenish” humanism of men like Leonardo Bruni. Abravanel is a humanist of the kind represented by Coluccio Salutati, who might be said to have served as his model.⁷⁷ That is to say, he is a humanist who uses his classical learning to confirm his thoroughly medieval conceptions rather than to free himself from them. He is distinguished from the medieval writers rather by the method which he uses than by the views which he expresses. This method may be called historical.⁷⁸ Abravanel tends to pay more attention to the sources of the tradition than to the tradition itself. He often urges the difference between the literal sense of the Bible and the midrashic interpretations; in doing this, he is guided, not as a medieval rationalist might have been, by an opposition to the “mythical” or “mystical” tendencies of the Midrash—for these tendencies are in full accordance with his own deepest inclinations—but by an interest in establishing the pure, undistorted meaning of the divinely inspired text, by an interest not so much in proving that a certain favored doctrine is revealed, and therefore true, but to know exactly what Revelation teaches, in order to be able to adopt that teaching, whatever it may be. By preferring in this spirit the sources of the tradition to the tradition itself, he can scarcely avoid the danger of coming into conflict with the teaching of tradition. An important example of that criticism of traditional views, which is based on the return to the sources (both the literal sense of the Bible and Josephus), has attracted our attention in the foregoing pages. To the same connection belongs Abravanel’s criticism of certain traditional opinions concerning the authorship of some biblical books, a criticism by which he paved the way for the much more thoroughgoing biblical criticism of Spinoza.⁷⁹ When considering these

77. Cf. Alfred von Martin, *Mittelalterliche Welt- und Lebensanschauung im Spiegel der Schriften Coluccio Salutatis* (Munich and Berlin, 1913), pp. 22, 61ff., 82ff., and 97ff., and the same author’s *Coluccio Salutati’s Traktat Vom Tyrannen* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1913), pp. 75ff. [Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406) was an Italian humanist of the fourteenth century: he was the author of numerous works on philosophic and literary matters (e.g., *On the Labors of Hercules*), and on textual and historical criticism; a cultural and political leader in Renaissance Florence; a gatherer of ancient and medieval manuscripts in an impressive library; and a student of Petrarch’s in helping to rediscover ancient arts and texts, and to recover their wisdom.]

78. With due caution.

79. Cf. Leo Strauss, *Die Religionskritik Spinozas* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1930), pp. 279ff. [See Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, pp. 318–21, which lists passages in medieval Jewish biblical commentaries which likely served as Spinoza’s sources; of the seventeen passages in Spinoza, seven of the sources are located in Abravanel. For Abravanel’s scriptural commentary and its method as a precursor to Spinoza, see Lawee, “Isaac Abarbanel: From Medieval to Renaissance Jewish Biblical Scholarship,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, op. cit.]

and similar facts, we may be inclined to complete our earlier statement that Abravanel's thought was fundamentally determined by the Jewish tradition by adding that his teaching tends to be more of a biblicist than of a traditionalist character. But after having granted this, we must stress all the more that the assumptions of the premedieval world to which Abravanel turns back, sometimes by criticizing medieval opinions, are not fundamentally different from the medieval assumptions from which he started. He goes back, it is true, from the monarchist ideal of the Middle Ages to the aristocratic ideal of antiquity. But, as matters stand, this does not mean more than that he goes back from the moderate hierocratic ideal of the Middle Ages to the much more intransigent hierocratic ideal of the period of the Second Temple, as expounded by Josephus. He is distinguished from the Jewish medieval writers by the fact that he is much more clerical than they are.

His descent was, as he believed, royal. His soul was the soul of a priest—of a priest who had not forgotten that the Temple, built by King Solomon in the holy city, was “infinitely inferior in sanctity” to the tabernacle erected by Moses in the desert.⁸⁰ Whatever he may have had to learn from the Cynics or from the *Bucolics* of antiquity as regards the dubious merits of human arts and city life, his knowledge of the sinful origin of cities, and of towers, and of kingdoms, and of the punishment following the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge was not borrowed from any foreign source: it was the inheritance of his own race which was commanded to be a kingdom of priests.

80. Commentary on I Kings 6:1 (fol. 217, col. 3).